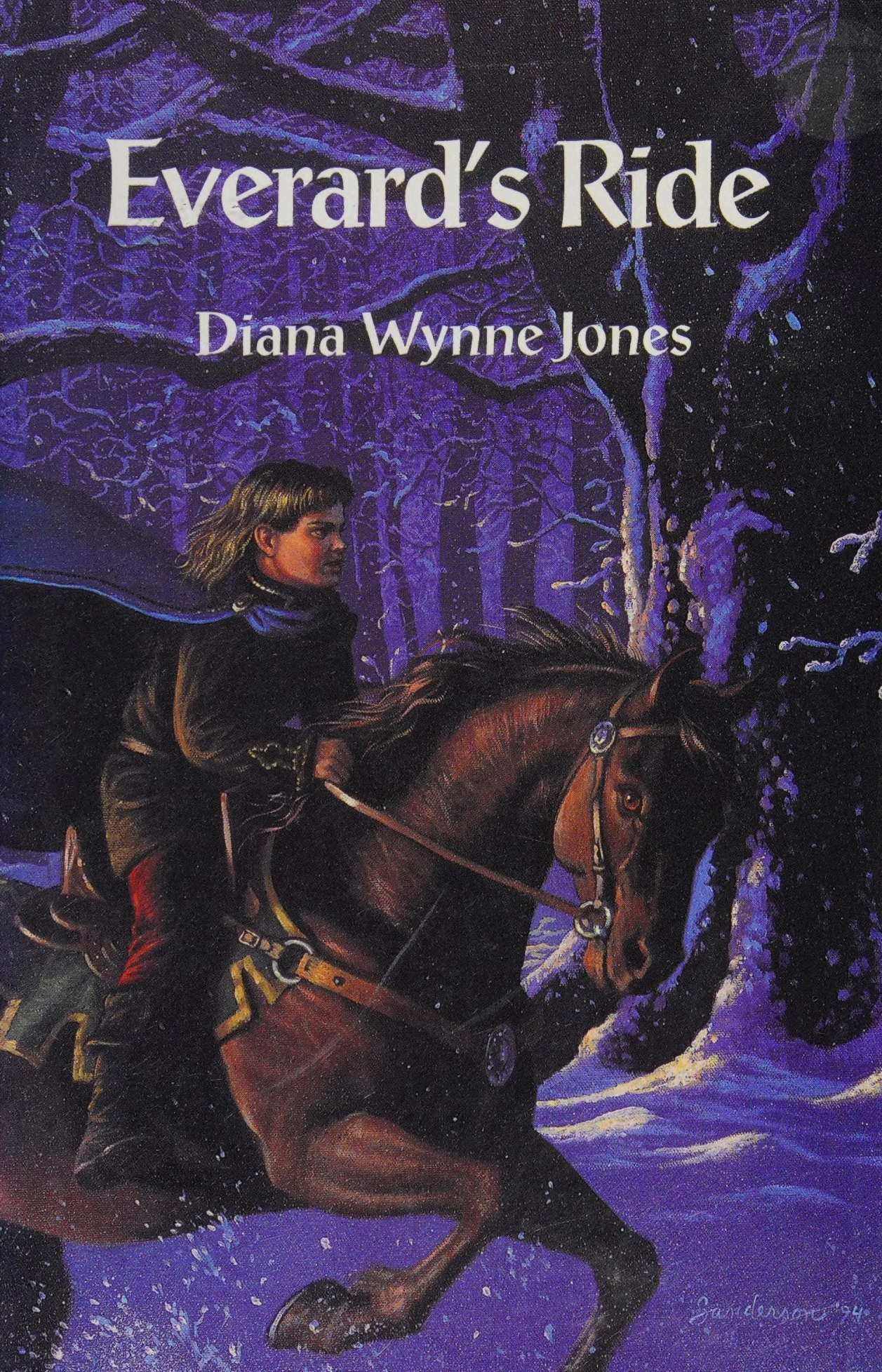
Everard's Ride

Diana Wynne Jones



trade $19.95
slipcased $30.00

Everard's Ride

Everard's Ride is the 1995 Boskone book by Guest of Honor Diana Wynne Jones. It contains two never-before-published novellas, "Everard's Ride" and "The True State of Affairs," six stories, and an article on Tolkien's narrative art.

The introduction is by noted fantasy author and Boskone 32 guest Patricia Wrede.

Everard's Ride is published in a limited edition of 1000 copies, of which the 10 lettered and the first 175 numbered are autographed and slipcased, and the remaining are numbered. The full-color, wrap-around dust jacket art is by Ruth Sanderson, Boskone 32's Official Artist.

For a complete list of books available from
NESFA Press, please write to:
NESFA Press
Box 809
Framingham, MA 01701-0203
USA

Dust jacket illustration "Everard's Ride"
Copyright 1995 by Ruth Sanderson
Dust jacket design by Merle and Aron Insinga

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/everardsride0000jone

Everard's Ride

Diana Wynne Jones

The NESFA Press
Post Office Box 809
Framingham, MA 01701-0203
1995

Copyright 1995 by Diana Wynne Jones

Introduction
Copyright 1995 by Patricia C. Wrede

Dust jacket illustration "Everard's Ride"
Copyright 1995 by Ruth Sanderson

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM OR BY ANY ELECTRONIC OR MECHANICAL MEANS INCLUDING INFORMATION STORAGE AND RETRIEVAL WITHOUT PERMISSION IN WRITING FROM THE PUBLISHER, EXCEPT BY A REVIEWER, WHO MAY QUOTE BRIEF PASSAGES IN A REVIEW.

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 94-074122

International Standard Book Number:
0-915368-63-3 (Trade Edition)
0-915368-76-5 (Slipcased Edition)

This is a limited edition of 1000 copies. The first 185 copies, of which 10 are lettered A through J and 175 are numbered 1 through 175, are an autographed and slipcased edition with special endpapers. The remaining 815 copies are numbered 176 through 990 and constitute the trade edition.

This is book No. 707

Copyright Acknowledgments

"Everard's Ride" Copyright 1995 Diana Wynne Jones.
"The True State of Affairs" Copyright 1995 Diana Wynne Jones.
"Dragon Reserve, Home Eight" appeared in *Warlock at the Wheel and Other Stories by Diana Wynne Jones*, Macmillan Children's Books 1984 and Greenwillow Books 1984. Copyright 1984 Diana Wynne Jones.
"nad and Dan adn Quaffy" appeared in *Digital Dreams*, edited by David V. Barrett, New English Library, 1990. Copyright 1990 Diana Wynne Jones.
"No One" appeared in *Warlock at the Wheel and Other Stories by Diana Wynne Jones*, Macmillan Children's Books 1984 and Greenwillow Books 1984. Copyright 1984 Diana Wynne Jones.
"The Shape of the Narrative in *The Lord of the Rings*" appeared in *J. R. R. Tolkien: This Far Land*, edited by Robert Giddings, Vision Press 1983. Copyright 1983 Diana Wynne Jones.
"The Master" appeared in *Hidden Turnings*, edited by Diana Wynne Jones, Methuen Children's Books 1989 and Greenwillow Books 1990. Copyright 1989 Diana Wynne Jones.
"The Plague of Peacocks" appeared in *Warlock at the Wheel and Other Stories by Diana Wynne Jones*, Macmillan Children's Books 1984 and Greenwillow Books 1984. Copyright 1984 Diana Wynne Jones.

Contents

Introduction by *Patricia C. Wrede* ix

Everard's Ride 1

Part I — Riders Through the Bay

1 - Outlaw 1

2 - Wild Rider 10

3 - Truants 17

4 - Prince 24

Part II — Riders by Night

1 - Murder 33

2 - Camp 39

3 - Dungeon 44

4 - Armies 53

Part III — Riders by Day

1 - Courcys 60

2 - Tracks 65

3 - Castles-in-the-Air 73

4 - Pistol 81

Part IV — Cecilia's Last Ride

1 - Hunt 89

2 - Kill 97

3 - Gone Away 104

nad and Dan adn Quaffy 115

The Shape of the Narrative in *The Lord of the Rings* 129

No One 147

Dragon Reserve, Home Eight 167

The Master 189

The Plague of Peacocks 203

The True State of Affairs 213

Introduction
Patricia C. Wrede

Those who already know the work of Diana Wynne Jones need no further introduction to it (which is a good thing, because they have probably skipped right to the stories, which is exactly what I would do if somebody else had ended up writing this). For those who do *not* know Diana's work, a few comments may be appropriate.

Diana Wynne Jones has been one of my favorite authors for years and years. For me, her work has originality, a deep sense of compassion, and something that I can only call magic (in the literary, rather than the literal, sense of the word). So it has puzzled me for a long time that she is not better known to readers of science fiction and fantasy.

I can think of no good reason why this should be so. Her books have not been unavailable or difficult to come by on this side of the Atlantic, as are those of so many British writers. Her style and humor ought, I think, to have wide appeal. Yet she has somehow managed to write and publish an entire shelf full of books and short stories without becoming a household name.

Perhaps this collection will help remedy this situation. The shorter pieces provide a good cross-section of her work, from the analytical essay on "The Shape of the Narrative in *The Lord of the Rings*" to the quirky humor of "No One" to the uneasy overtones and uncertain ending of "The Master." (About "Everard's Ride" it is difficult to say much of anything except "It is very good" without giving away more than many readers like to know in advance.)

In short, there isn't a loser in the lot. You have a real treat in store for you. So turn the page, and enjoy.

— Patricia C. Wrede, December 1994

Everard's Ride

Everard's Ride

PART I
Riders Through the Bay

Chapter 1 – Outlaw

The events in this story took place rather more than a hundred years ago, when Queen Victoria was on the throne and the division between rich and poor was much more important than it now is. Your grandfather's grandfather would then have been a boy of twelve, like the boy to whom these things happened.

His name was Alex Hornby; and it was his misfortune to occupy the uncomfortable upper end of that gap between rich and poor, where you were not quite gentry, but too well off to be anything else. His father, Josiah Hornby, was a farmer. The family lived in a low stone farmhouse halfway up a hill, looking out across a great river estuary. From the foot of the hill a long causeway ran out into the bay, to a small rocky island on which stood the ruins of a castle. So, though all their fires smoked in the sea-wind, they had the grandest view in the neighbourhood. Above the farmhouse, the top of the hill had been cleared of trees, ready for the great new house Josiah Hornby intended to build the following summer.

Josiah, who was, like many Victorians, a grim and striving person, was changing into a gentleman-farmer as fast as he could afford to do it. He was a fairly wealthy man already. Twenty years or so before, he had bought shares in the railway which ran all round the bay beside the sea, and his shares had prospered. He had bought shares in other things. At the same time, out of what he had been paid for letting the railway run through his land, he bought the island in the bay. He had it for a song, because its owner was hard up, and because it was said to be haunted. But Josiah cared not a rap for ghosts, or gossip. He bought the island because

it was cheap and because of its ruined castle. It was grand and gentlemanly, he thought, to own a castle.

Alex and his sister Cecilia were pleased with the castle too, although they were not pleased with much else about starting to be rich. It meant that Alex had to go as a weekly boarder to a grammar school in the nearest big town. It meant that Cecilia had a governess. It meant—which was worst of all—that they dropped homely friends in the village and tried to be on visiting-terms with the Courcys of Arnforth Hall. The Courcys noticed them—just. Josiah went to the Hall once a week on business. The children were called in from time to time if more guests were needed at the Courcy children's parties. Cecilia had once refused to go to a Courcy party. Her father had been so angry that Alex hid in the loft and Cecilia set out across the bay to run away and make her fortune. She did not get very far that time. Josiah came after her on horseback and spanked her, right in the middle of the bay, beside the river-channel.

The strange things began to happen just before Christmas, when Cecilia had turned sixteen. The governess had gone the week before. Cecilia was still in trouble about it.

"Mr. Hornby," said the governess, standing up like a frozen steel ramrod and clasping her mittens in front of her, "I will not stay a day longer in the same house with that girl of yours. She is wild, impertinent and disorderly. She is quite unteachable and utterly unladylike. I leave this evening."

"Dash and bother it, madam!" cried Josiah Hornby. "Remember the child has no mother. What has she done?"

"I refuse to bear tales," the governess said. "Kindly order the pony-trap round in time for the London train."

"But I only hid in the loft and ate apples," said Cecilia. "And I said I had no wish to be a lady if it meant wearing mouse-coloured mittens."

Josiah was so angry that he threw things. No-one dared to go near him for two days except old Miss Gatly the housekeeper. When Alex came home for the last weekend before the holidays, his rather was still angry.

"Your sister's in disgrace," he told Alex. "Dash me, if I could see my way to finding the money, I'd pack the little vixen off to one of them Swiss seminaries, be sure I would."

"If he does," said Cecilia to Alex in the kitchen, "I'll run away again. And this time I shall do it so that he will never find me. So there."

"Let me come with you," Alex begged. "I shan't want to be left behind if you're gone. Think of nothing but school and Father!"

"Hush!" said Cecilia.

Old Miss Gatly came into the kitchen carrying Josiah's teapot to be filled with more hot water. Alex bit a great mouthful of muffin and thought that at least at home the food was good. Cecilia drank tea, with her little finger crooked the way the governess did it, and smiled at Miss Gatly. Miss Gatly shook her head at her—she wore a crisp starched cap which rattled when she moved her head.

"Cecilia," she said. "For shame. Why make fun of the poor lady now she's left?" She creaked and rattled and breathed heavily as she heaved the kettle up from the hob. "My rheumatics is bad tonight," she said. "It's the fog. Down like a blanket now, all over the bay. Just the weather for queer things on the island. They say there's been lights seen there again—we'll be lucky if that's all there is to it."

"Tell us—tell us the stories," Alex said, delighted and greasy, with his mouth full of muffin. They loved Miss Gatly in this mood.

Miss Gatly came back after taking the teapot to the parlour and told them some of the stories. She sat by the range, knitting socks, needles clicking, cap rattling, and talked in the strange, formal way old country-people still use when they tell stories which may not quite be true. She told them how the ghost-lights flitted through the island on foggy nights and were seen to go winding through the bay where no-one else dared to go for fear of quicksands. She told of the dangerous kingdom of Falleyfell out in the bay and how those who saw it were as good as dead.

"And if," she said, "a wise man hereabouts sees aught of this on a clear night, he will shut his eyes and turn away, making the sign of the cross for safety..."

Alex put his thin greasy hand under his pointed chin and leant forward with an eager sigh. Cecilia had tucked her feet up under her green tartan skirt, with one hand holding down the bulging crinoline. With the other hand she was absent-mindedly twirling and pulling a bright gold ringlet. The draught sighed in the chimney and a sheep coughed outside. Cecilia sighed too, because the best part of the tale was coming.

"These things seen of a night are bad enough," said Miss Gatly, "but let the wise man beware of things seen by day. Once in a hundred years, they say, a horseman gallops through the bay. He is the Wild Rider, the Rider of Doom, and let those who see him take heed. For within the year, as sure as fate, some poor soul will perish in the bay. He may be caught in the tide, and they say that happens to some, but, more like, the poor soul founders in the quicksands and vanishes without a trace."

The sheep coughed again. Alex, with a delicious shiver, looked over his shoulder at the window. It was dark, streaming wet with the warmth from the range, but there was someone outside. For a second, with his

hair prickling, Alex was sure that he saw a face. Then there was nothing and no sound either.

"It was the fog," he thought. "It plays the strangest tricks. We all know that."

Miss Gatly put up her knitting, lit her candle and creaked away to bed. In winter she went to bed at seven. Alex, still wrought up and shivering, pushed aside the tea and muffins and spread out Latin and History books for his weekend homework. Cecilia, whose duty it was to wash up the tea, was lazy with excitement after the story. She still sat with her feet curled up, sometimes twirling her ringlet, sometimes idly sewing the bodice of her best dress. There was to be a Courcy party just after Christmas and the dress had to be ready for then. Cecilia had hoped her father would forbid her to go after the governess-incident, but it was the last thing Josiah would have forbidden. Cecilia sighed. Outside, in the farmyard, the sheepdog barked, a snarling uncertain bark, and was quiet.

"Tyke doesn't like the fog," Alex remarked. "Cecil, explain Caesar's campaign against Gaul to me. I know you know."

Cecilia smiled, because she liked being called Cecil. She had always wished she had been born a boy. And she was proud of knowing Latin. She had learnt it from Alex's books while she was helping him to learn it. Sewing away busily, she explained, and Alex listened, chewing his pen. Outside Tyke growled, and was quiet again.

"Then," said Cecilia, "Caesar was quite shocking to the poor Helvetii. I cannot at the moment remember why they came into it—"

"But I have to know," said Alex. "Try to remember."

Cecilia thought, scratching at the scrubbed table with her needle. The grandfather clock ticked in a clattering, unhurried way, and the lamp on the table whispered and flared sideways in a cold draught from somewhere.

Cecilia said at last: "Well, they were wandering about in south-eastern Gaul when they should have been in Switzerland, but I—"

"They were in search of a new home, poor souls," said someone else.

Alex jumped up. His chair fell over behind him. Cecilia, with a gasp that was nearly a scream, jerked round and slapped one hand down on her crinoline, horrified at all the frothy petticoats she had been showing. The stranger latched the back door without a sound and came down the room towards them with the faintest of swishing and chinking.

"I beg your pardon for intruding on you," he said.

They stared at him. The hands of the grandfather clock had moved on nearly three minutes before they could believe they were really seeing him. He was exactly like the pictures in Alex's open History book—ex-

cept that he had taken off his complicated feathered hat as he shut the door. His hair was long and dark brown and wavy with dampness. He wore a great orange cloak, stained at the hem with water and mud, and tight wet boots with long jagged spurs to them. Under the cloak they could just see clothes that took their breath away: dagged, embroidered hanging sleeves, clasps studded with jewels, a shining sword-belt hanging across his chest, and the smooth, used-looking hilt of the sword itself.

Cecilia came to her senses first. He must, she thought, be an actor who had lost his way. She saw that he was not very much older than herself and that he was soaking wet, very tired, and full of worry and weariness.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "You gave me a terrible shock for a moment. Have you lost your way in the fog? May we offer you a cup of tea?"

The stranger shook his head. "I do not think I have lost my way. This is the farmhouse at the end of the causeway, is it not?"

Cecilia nodded. "That's right. Then what—?"

"What is tea?" asked the stranger.

Cecilia dragged at her tight new corset, afraid that she might faint with astonishment. "I—I'll brew you a pot," she said weakly.

Alex still stood staring, with his Latin book in his hands, and Miss Gatly's stories whirling around in his head. "Who *are* you?" he said, very high and squeaking, and too frightened to care. "Just tell us who you are."

The stranger smiled at him. "You should not attend to that old lady's stories," he said. "I am a real man, and until yesterday I was Count of Gairne. My name is Robert—and it seems I am still allowed the title of Lord Howeforce."

"Then it was you I saw at the window," Alex said, fixing on the only part of the answer that he could understand.

The strange man nodded, and Cecilia saw that he shivered too.

"You are soaked to the skin," she said. "Whoever you are, you must come by the fire and dry yourself. Come, sit down, and I'll make some tea." Ever afterwards, she was amazed at how brave she was. She hurried up to the stranger and pulled at his damp arm. He was certainly real, but very cold, and the stones in the clasp of his cloak were precious ones, she was sure—not actor's bits of glass. He came with her to the range and sat down thankfully in the warmth.

Cecilia put the kettle to boil. Alex moved round to where he could see the stranger better but still keep a chair between them.

"Are you from—from the island?" he asked nervously. The man cast a shadow, he could see, so he could not be dead—Miss Gatly had told them many times that dead men have no shadows. But he looked as strange

and outlandish to Alex in his Eton jacket and skimpy ankle-length trousers as he would have looked to anyone in the twentieth century.

The man shook his head at him kindly, as if he saw how frightened Alex was. "My lands lie—lay—over the water from the island," he said, "but I think you would think of me as from the island."

"Then," said Alex, too amazed and nervous to be polite, "whatever are you doing here?"

"Alex!" said Cecilia. "Leave the poor gentleman alone. If you were wet through and worn out, how would you like someone staring at you and asking rude questions?" And to the stranger, she said: "You are not to answer him, Mr.—er—your lordship, until you have drunk a cup of tea."

"But," said Alex, somewhat nastily, because Cecilia had hurt his feelings treating him like a little boy in front of this strange person, "but suppose Father comes in here before he's told us anything."

That frightened Cecilia and gave her a change of heart about the stranger. She knew Josiah would be angry to find them entertaining him. He would think the man was a lunatic—and now she thought of that Cecilia was not at all sure that he might not, indeed, be a lunatic. Perhaps a rich lunatic, that would be it. She turned her back and poked the fire, wondering what they might do if he was.

"Never fear," said the man. "The gentleman your father is engaged on a pile of manuscripts and seems not likely to stir. I took the liberty of looking in upon him, through the window. And, as for your question, sir, I am here somewhat in the position of the unfortunate Helvetii. I have had to leave my lands."

"Oh!" said Alex. He was fascinated. Here seemed to be a story such as even Miss Gatly would find hard to equal. He itched to have the man say more. He spoke in such a formal lofty way that ordinary English sounded splendid as he used it.

The man was looking at Cecilia. "My lady there," he said to Alex, "is your sister, is she not?"

"Yes. She's Cecilia. I'm Alex."

Cecilia blushed and was even more nervous. What could he mean by calling her "my lady"? He knew they lived on a farm. He had said so. If Josiah had been a nicer father, she would have run and fetched him. As it was, all she could do was to make the tea and pretend to be very busy. There was a nasty silence, with Alex jigging impatiently and the stranger staring sadly at the fire, until Cecilia poured the tea into a cup and passed it to him with her hands shaking. "Sugar?" she asked coldly.

The man looked very puzzled by the cup and saucer, but he took it politely and said: "Thank you, my lady."

Cecilia lost her temper, as much from fright as from anger. "I'm *not* your lady," she told him loudly. "I am not a lady at all. You know perfectly well I am simply a farmer's daughter."

Alex blushed—he hated Cecilia's rages—and to Cecilia's consternation, the stranger blushed too. He stared at her as if she had said the most embarrassing thing he had ever heard. He stared so that tears came into Cecilia's eyes and she put her hands over her mouth. Then he looked down at the tea, which he was holding extraordinarily clumsily.

"I—I apologize," he said. "As you see, I am woefully unfamiliar with manners Outside. What do I do with this—this tea?"

Cecilia giggled. "You drink it. Try some sugar if you have not had tea before."

Alex sighed. It looked as if the embarrassment was over. The man tried the tea. Alex was sure that he did not like it but was too polite to say anything. "I wonder what it is he usually drinks," he thought. Cecilia, meanwhile, made up her mind to believe that he really was the extraordinary thing he seemed until she had found out more.

"Won't you take off your cloak?" she asked politely. "You must have come a long way for it to have got so wet."

The stranger put down the cup and unclasped his cloak. Cecilia took it from him and spread it over a chair to dry, while Alex marvelled at the richness of the strange clothes underneath. "I have not come so very far," the stranger said, "but I was pursued. My horse was killed and I was forced to hide in various wet places." His boots were steaming in the heat, and the fur lining of his sleeves was soaked and draggled.

Alex could easily believe what he said was true. "Tell me," he begged.

The stranger pushed back his hair with both hands and stared into the fire. "What shall I say?" he said wearily. It suddenly struck Alex that the man was really not very old at all, scarcely a man, hardly older than Martin Courcy or the great boys at school. But he was handsomer and more grown-up-looking than anyone Alex knew of the same age.

"Say why you were pursued," Alex said and was thrilled at the answer.

"I am an outlaw. I am accused of killing a man I did not kill." The stranger looked earnestly from Alex to Cecilia, plainly very anxious that they should believe him. "I swear to you I did not kill him. This man was my liege lord, and to kill him would be as evil as if I had killed my own father. Someone killed him—who it was I cannot say—and I was accused. It seems I had enemies where I thought to have had friends. And it gave colour to their case that I did indeed kill a man—my uncle—when I was scarcely turned fourteen."

Cecilia gasped. Alex was frightened again. Outlaws were all very well, but a self-confessed murderer sitting beside one's kitchen-range was a totally different matter. "What made you do that?" he said.

"My uncle," the stranger answered, "had killed my father. I saw him, and so did several others, push my father from the battlements of Gairne Castle. There was no other course open to me—but I assure you that it was in fair fight that I killed him. He had always been a poor swordsman."

"Well," said Cecilia, "I suppose that was all right. But could you not have brought the law on him?"

The stranger was a little puzzled. "It was according to the law, what I did—er—madam."

"Call me Cecilia, for goodness' sake," she answered. "And was there any reason why you might have killed this other man?"

"I assure you, none."

Alex asked: "And you would like us to hide you here, would you? Until you can prove your innocence."

The stranger laughed, not greatly amused. "That may be for as long as I live. There is no evidence that I can see to establish a proof. No—if I might beg hospitality here for one night, it will be much more than I deserve for my rude intrusion."

Alex looked at Cecilia. "What do you say to the guest room? It's a long way from Father and Miss Gatly."

"Yes," said Cecilia. "I'll get a warming-pan. And you will need something to eat, I imagine."

"I would be grateful for some food," the outlaw said. "It was early this morning when last I ate."

"You must be famished!" cried Cecilia. She hurried away the remains of the muffins and brought out what food there was in the pantry. Alex kept watch for their father while she worked.

Cecilia was a little embarrassed by the food they had. "It is plain and good," she thought, "but it can be nothing like what he must be used to. I am sure, from the look of him, that he is used to the choicest of things."

While the outlaw ate, Alex wandered between the kitchen door and the table, watching the man eat and hoping for more talk. He was fascinated by the way he did not seem to use a fork. The stranger smiled at him.

"I fear I interrupted my lady—er—your sister in her exposition of Caesar's campaigns in Gaul. Might I take her place, while I eat, and continue the explanation?"

"That is very kind of you," Alex said.

So the stranger took up the story where Cecilia had left off. He explained many more things than Cecilia, or even Alex's schoolmaster, would have thought necessary, and he explained them so clearly and vividly that Alex never forgot them. He knew all about fighting. Alex had never heard a battle explained before as if one were actually giving the orders to the soldiers, but that was the way the stranger explained Caesar's battles. Alex began to admire Caesar far more than he had ever done in his life, and he admired this outlaw even more than Caesar.

Cecilia came in and out while the man talked. The man seemed very shy of her, particularly of calling her Cecilia. He went out of his way not to call her anything. And as for Cecilia, and Alex too, they were nearly reduced to calling him "Hey, you!"

"What *should* we call him?" Cecilia kept asking herself, as she hurried up and down stairs. "It seems as if he has lost most of what names he had when he became an outlaw."

They became shyer and shyer, because the longer they left it, the more stupid it seemed not to have asked him what name they should use. It was not until they had taken him into the bleak whitewashed guest room and Cecilia was turning back the elaborate white crocheted overlay on the guest-bed, that Alex was impolite enough to ask.

"What would you like us to call you?" he blurted.

The outlaw smiled. "My name is Robert," he answered.

"Very well, then," Cecilia said, briskly, because she was so thankful. "Goodnight, Robert. I hope you sleep well." Then she ran out of the guest-room, with Alex behind her, both of them feeling very silly.

They felt even sillier the next morning when they crept along to the guest-room and found that he had gone. At first they thought he had vanished without a trace. The bed was stark, empty and neatly covered. Its crisp valences looked as if they had never been disturbed. "And he did not look like the kind of man who could make a bed," Cecilia thought.

"We couldn't have dreamt it, could we?" Alex whispered, staring round the chilly room. Then he saw the kitchen candlestick sitting on one of the crocheted mats on the wash-stand. "One of us must have believed in him enough to bring this here at least," he said, and looked in the pitcher. The water had been iced over, but the ice was broken. "He must have washed, Cecil. Look."

Cecilia, feeling glum and flat, came over and agreed. She picked up the candlestick with the guttered candle, thinking that Miss Gatly ought not to find it there, and they saw that there was a slip of paper underneath.

Alex pounced on it. It had been torn from the front of the book of sermons on the bedside table. There was no writing on it—there had been

no writing-things in the room—but there was an orange-wax seal, stamped with something which must by the size have been a seal-ring. Alex held it to the light. The device might have been a bee or a wasp—some kind of insect, they were sure—and if they tilted it this way and that, they could just make out the letters round the edge: GAIRNE.

"He told us," Alex said, "that he had been Count of Gairne. Do you remember?"

"Yes," said Cecilia. "He was real, then."

Chapter 2 – Wild Rider

The next strange occurrence was the day before Christmas Eve. Alex came home for the holidays that morning and he and Cecilia went skating in the afternoon at the edge of the bay. In those days the shores of the great river-estuary were not so well raised and drained as they later were. Below the Hornbys' house, almost beside the long rocky causeway to the island, was a large meadow which was flooded every winter as the river swelled with rain and tides. The railway ran along one side, next to the road, and the other side was open to the sea. The fresh water froze in the meadow, and then was covered with sea-water during the spring tides. Out in the bay the river-channels which wound on either side of the dark island had partly frozen over too, and drifts of snow on their banks had hardened into shining grey cliffs of ice. The mud sand of the estuary was all black and grey and dangerous with frost, until the sea swept in and covered it up.

The tide was out that afternoon. The sun was red and the sea wind cut like a saw. The ice in the flooded pasture was deeper and harder than it had been within living memory, and people came for miles to skate. Among them came the Courcys. Alex's heart sank when he saw the handsome carriages come dashing up and stop at the bottom of the hill. He and Cecilia had been enjoying themselves with Miss Gatly's nephews and nieces from the next farm, but at the sight of the carriages, the Gatlys all moved off to practice figure-skating on their own. Alex drearily watched the whole Courcy family get out. There was Martin, the eldest, who always had his gentlemanly hands in his noble pockets; Harry, who was the same age as Alex and whom Alex liked even less than Martin; the in-between brother Egbert, who was a nondescript; and then all the girls, who were so much more elegant than Cecilia, but nothing like so pretty—Letitia, Lavinia, Charlotte (who was grown-up and engaged to be married), Emily, and little Susannah, whom Alex disliked more heartily than any of them. And there they all were holding out their feet for the coachman to screw their skates on as if none of them had hands of their own.

"Oh, Cecil!" Alex wailed.

"We have not seen them," Cecilia answered. "And maybe they have not seen us." She began on a complicated figure.

The Courcys, with their skates screwed on, came slithering down onto the ice. The other skaters made way for them. The two carriages went on up to the Hornbys' house. Alex had seen that Lady Courcy herself was in one of them. He knew that in the house there would be much rushing about with sweet wine, petits fours, preserves, footstools, shawls, and firescreens. He felt sorry for Miss Gatly. Cecilia did not look. She continued to skate, and she skated very well, better than Charlotte and the rest, who were tottering, giggling and hanging onto their brothers.

After a while, the Courcys had skated over near to Cecilia. "My dear Cecilia," cried Lavinia, "*do* demonstrate that figure again. This is quite an exhibition."

Cecilia, very flushed, decided to stop, then thought better of it and did something different so as not to seem to do what they wanted. The Courcys all stood round, slithering a little, Alex among them, a bevy of beautiful muffs and elegant hogskin gloves. Alex, in his worn school cape and gloves knitted by Miss Gatly, felt shabby and out of place. The Courcys genuinely admired Cecilia's skating.

"You get a great deal of practice—what?" said Egbert.

"Think where she lives. Glorious, beautiful place!" Letitia exclaimed, waving her muff at the bay. She was the poetic one. People thought her pale and interesting.

Alex thought sadly: "They are not nasty. They simply despise us for our pretentions. How I wish we did not have to have pretentions."

"I say, Alex." Martin slid gently up with his hands in his pockets. "I say, be a dear fellow, will you, and fix Susannah's skate. Clamp's coming loose or something."

Alex slid himself over to where Susannah's neat little cone-shape was waiting for him. Much as he disliked Susannah, he had no objection to mending her skate. He would have done it for anyone, and, anyway, he had a vague feeling that it was his station. What he objected to were the pert, hurtful remarks Susannah always made at him.

She said now, as Alex came up: "The cloaked figure of a highwayman! Do you really have to wear that cut-throat cape for school?"

"Yes," Alex said curtly. "It's an old foundation. The uniform goes back to Queen Elizabeth." And he thought that it was just like Susannah to hit on the shabbiest and most peculiar thing about him. It would have astonished him to know that Susannah admired him more than anyone she knew; and it would have staggered him if he had discovered she had broken her skate on purpose and sent Martin to fetch him specially. It

never entered his head that she was rude to him in a desperate hope that he would think she was clever.

She put out her tiny foot to him as haughtily as she knew how. "The latchet of whose skate you are not worthy to unloose," she said.

Alex, before he had half knelt down, stood up and glided away backwards. "Then let someone do it who *is* worthy," he said. "Besides, that's blasphemy, quoting the Bible like that."

He was too hurt himself to see that Susannah was nearly in tears, but her brothers and sisters saw and were around him in a second. Susannah was everyone's pet.

"Poor little Susannah! Never mind the oaf," came from at least three sisters.

Martin said: "I say, better mind your language, Alex." Egbert echoed him. "What?"

Alex, surrounded and angry, had to stick to his point. And as so often happened to him, both at school and among the Courcys, the more distressed he became, the more he spoke like the country boy he was. "I don't care. That were blasphemy she spoke."

Harry Courcy was onto it at once. "Ah doan't cear. Thaat were blaasphemee," he droned.

Maybe he had gone too far. Martin put out a skate and jabbed his brother hard in the leg. Nobody else said anything except Cecilia. She swung round in the middle of a figure—and round again before she could stop herself.

"Harry Courcy! Wait till I get my hands on you!"

This was too much for Alex. He wanted to black Harry's eye and could not, for fear of a thrashing from Josiah, and now here was Cecilia in one of her embarrassing rages. He plunged forward, away towards the bay, scattering Courcys right and left, for he took them by surprise and he was a more practiced skater. There he dug his toes down and came to a sharp stop, while the others looked after him, crying out indignantly. So it was that they were all among the first to see the Wild Rider.

Alex saw him come from the island. One moment there was nothing but that huddle of dark trees, and, the next moment, there was a great blue-grey horse in the middle of its leap. The rider on its back was black against the low red sun, except for his flying orange cloak. Then the horse landed and was galloping in one movement, pounding through the bay among the treacherous sands and frozen snows as if there were nothing but soft turf beneath its feet.

Charlotte Courcy had scarcely time to totter on the tips of her skates, beginning to faint, before there were two more horsemen in the sky by the island. One after another they soared and landed, and then they were

galloping after the first. Everyone in the field could hear the splash and bang of hooves as they galloped, off into the distance, through the river channel, and over the very quicksands themselves.

Then there was panic. One Wild Rider had been enough for the Gatlys and for most of the country people there, but three were too much even for the Courcys. People began skating, tumbling, running to get off the field and into the safety of a house. Some took their skates off and ran, some ran skates and all. Charlotte was lugged between Martin and Egbert. Susannah hobbled, helped by Harry. In no time at all everyone was on the road hurrying for home, help and fireside and for someone to tell what they had seen.

Only Alex and Cecilia were left, watching side by side, as the riders grew smaller and smaller until they vanished at the dark edge of the bay.

"Alex," said Cecilia, "that was Robert. I know it was."

"Yes," said Alex. "It was. And the others were chasing him."

They looked for a long, long minute over at the edge of the bay, but there was not a sign of a rider. Alex said anxiously:

"He had a good horse—I wish I had one half as good—and a small start."

"I could not *bear* him to be caught!" Cecilia said frantically. "Alex, can't we do something?"

At any other time Alex would have realised there was nothing they could do and begged Cecilia to come home. They would have quarrelled, but Alex would have won. Now, though, Alex had been hurt by the Courcys. He felt almost as if they had pinched him all over black and blue, it was such a real kind of hurt. And the Courcys were all in the farmhouse at the moment, no doubt telling their mother and Miss Gatly all about the three Wild Riders.

"We could go to the island," he said. "We might discover what happened."

"Oh, yes!" Cecilia was down on the ice unscrewing her skates before he had finished speaking. "Hurry, do, Alex!"

A minute later, they were stepping onto the shingle and rock of the long causeway to the island. It was not railed off in those days. The causeway was little more than a rough natural ridge of granite, strengthened long ago by the ancestor of the Courcys who had built the Castle. Nor was the island railed off. There was no need. No-one went there if they could help it. Neither Alex nor Cecilia had ever been there alone before. Josiah, who had had a miserable rough childhood himself, made his children lead more sheltered lives. He would never allow them to wander by themselves in wild places. Alex, for one, had never even wanted to visit the island alone before.

Halfway along the causeway, Cecilia took Alex's hand. The sun was low, now, and red and purple mist was creeping in all round them from the sea and the marshes. They were alone in the middle of the wide grim estuary and the island ahead was all gloomy bare trees, with a few black birds wheeling around the castle tower. The air was raw and freezing and there was not a sound either from land or from sea.

Alex, attempting to sound brave, said: "How did they go across the quicksands? Would there be a secret causeway, do you think? A horse and rider is too heavy for—" Then he stopped, because they had both remembered the way those riders had seemed to come out of thin air. Anything supernatural seemed possible after that.

"Run," said Cecilia firmly. "We can talk later."

They ran until they came beneath the trees of the island. When they stopped, hand in hand still, and stared up at it. It bulked huge and black now they were so near—much bigger, Alex thought, than one could have guessed from the shore. Its blackness and silence was appalling, and mist wreathed between the tree trunks.

Somehow, they made themselves go on. First Alex would pull, and Cecilia come reluctantly after. Then Alex would hang back, and Cecilia pull him. In this way they climbed the long steep hill among the stark winter trees and came gradually into more open land among spiny bushes and twisted small trees. Cecilia clenched one hand inside her muff to stop herself trembling. Alex slowly pulled to a halt.

"It—it seems bigger, Cecil."

Cecilia agreed. It was the opposite of what she expected. She had last been here in summer as quite a little girl. She had thought it would seem small, as things did when one saw them later when one was nearly grown-up. Bravely, she pulled Alex on.

Something black moved away from a twisted tree. For a moment they thought the tree was walking. Neither of them could move. Then the thing moved again, three or four slow steps, until it was right in front of them.

He was another island-person, a great deal younger than Robert, probably much the same age as Alex. He was taller, though—about Cecilia's height—and dressed in dense black velvet, with one or two small gold ornaments. The black plume of his hat curled almost round his white face and nearly disguised his pale fair hair. He looked at them angrily, narrowing his great blue eyes.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Cecilia, from what she could see in the dying light, suspected that his anger had to do with the fact that he had been crying. The tears shone

on his cheeks, and had made a dark smudge where he must have leant against the tree.

Politely and apologetically, she answered: "We saw someone we knew—Robert, his name is—riding across the bay, and we—"

That made him very angry. Cecilia saw she had been foolish to mention the outlaw. He put his hand on the gilded hilt of his sword. "So that is why you were sneaking so furtively through the woods! You have no right to be here if you are friends of his."

Cecilia stepped back behind Alex, very nervous of that sword and of the commanding set of the boy's head. Alex, however, stepped forward, angry too. It was that same set of the head that annoyed him. There was something Courcy-like about it. Harry had the same manner.

"What do you mean, no right?" he demanded. "I have every right in the world. My father owns this island. One day I shall own it."

"You!" exclaimed the boy. "Then you are an usurping hound. Draw your sword, or I shall run you through where you stand." And he drew his own sword with a clang and a flash of red reflected sun.

"Don't be a coward," said Alex. "Can't you see I haven't got a sword? Drop that and put your fists up like a man."

"Call me coward again—" threatened the boy.

Cecilia hung onto Alex by his shoulders. She had realised what had happened. In the dim light, Alex in his school cape must have seemed another island-person, particularly if one was not expecting to see anyone different.

"Stop it, both of you!" she said. "My brother and I do not belong here. We—we live at the farm along the causeway."

This alarmed the boy. He stood back a little with his sword trailing. "You are Outsiders? Then God forbid I should kill you! How is it you know that Howeforce? Did he run away Outside? I might have guessed he would."

"He did not have much choice, did he?" Alex answered. "The way he seems to be hounded here."

"So should vermin be hounded," the boy retorted. "And pray God he is dead by now."

"Oh, no!" said Cecilia. "Pray *not!*"

The boy was furious with her, with them both. "Go away! Leave this island! Who are you, mere peasant's children from Outside, to come here and judge us? How dare you support such a man as Howeforce! How dare you call me coward! Go away, I tell you!"

Cecilia was only too ready to go. The island was a terrible place. She was cold, frightened, and miserable at the outlaw's probable death. She hated this boy and she wanted never to see him again.

Alex hated him too. He was even ruder than Harry Courcy and more hurtful than Susannah. He was bigger, too, which was very satisfactory. "I shall not go," he said, "until you take that back. Take it back, or I shall black one of your big blue eyes, sword or no sword." His accent had thickened again, but he did not care.

The boy sheathed his sword, put his hands on his hips, stuck his chin in the air, and laughed sneeringly. "Go away, little peasant."

Alex hit him, beautifully, and as hard as he could. The other boy took it well, staggered, blinked, and hit him back. Alex dodged and closed in. He was the best fighter for his size in his school. He had fought many times in defense of Josiah's pretentions, and it pleased him to do it again now, in such strange circumstances. The island-boy was not using his height and reach to advantage. Perhaps he was more used to fighting with that sword of his. Alex kept an eye on his sword-hand, in case he should suddenly use it. He was rather surprised that he never tried to.

Cecilia hovered, anxiously watching, biting her muff so as not to cry out. She had learnt not to interrupt Alex when he took to his fists. She winced each time Alex was hit as she always did. Then after a while, she began to wince for the other boy. He was getting much the worst of it. Alex beat him to a tree and went on beating him. The boy was reduced to keeping one arm over his head and trying to push Alex away with the other. He had long ago lost his hat and his hair was all over his face. Even so, Cecilia could see that his nose was bleeding.

"I think you should stop," she said. But she forgot that she was biting her muff, and Alex did not hear her.

Soon, even Alex began to feel some shame at hitting an opponent who was so obviously beaten, but he was irritated that the boy would not admit it. He held the boy against the tree with one hand and tried to see his face. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know when you're beaten?"

The boy did not answer. Alex shook him. "Come on, say you're sorry."

The boy raised his head. "Why should I? I am not sorry. What I said was true. You *are* the son of a peasant—I can tell from the way you speak."

Alex was so angry and exasperated at this that he shook him again, harder. He was afraid that if he hit the boy any more he might do him some serious injury. "Do you need to be broken into little pieces before you give in?" he said. "You can apologize at least. You can admit you believe my father owns this island."

"But he does not," the boy answered, sounding really surprised.

Alex could have screamed. He could have picked the boy up and thrown him into a spiny bush. "All right, then. You can take back what you said about Robert. He is not vermin. And he swore to us that he did not kill this man he is supposed to have killed."

"Of course he would say that," the boy replied disdainfully. "I have no doubt he would swear to anything. But I should know the truth, since 'this man he is supposed to have killed' was my father."

"Oh!" Alex let him go and stood back, truly ashamed of himself. That would explain the black clothes, of course, and why the boy had been all by himself, crying. Alex had done much the same soon after his mother died, and he had nearly been lost in the fog, too miserable to notice where he went. He was about to apologize, when the boy said:

"Now, take back what *you* said. You should apologize to *me*."

"I'll be hanged if I shall!" said Alex. "You'll apologize to me before I say a word of apology to you."

"Then you can wait till your dying day," answered the boy. "You may leave us now."

"Oh, may I?" said Alex. "And you may leave *us*. Go to blazes if you like. Come, Cecilia." And he swung round and stalked off the way he had come, with Cecilia hurrying behind, sober and sorry and very, very chilly.

Alex marched along the causeway in a fine glow of anger, sucking the bruised lip which was all he had to show for the fight. "I wish," he thought, "that I *had* thrown him in a bush now."

"Alex," said Cecilia, "I think you should have said you were sorry. After all, somebody must have killed his father."

"Well, how was I to know? And he brought it in so meanly too, right at the end, and seemed to think it gave him no end of an advantage. Cecil, I promise you that, if I ever say I'm sorry to that big—big *caterpillar,* you can kick me from here to Arnforth. So there!"

Chapter 3 – Truants

It was December 27th, the day of the Courcy party, that Alex and Cecilia took the adventure into their own hands. To a great extent, it was their father's fault that they did so. Josiah was outraged when they arrived back from the island, after dark, when all the Courcys had long ago gone home.

"Where did you run away to?" he demanded. "Gatly's?"

"No!" said Cecilia. "We did not run away at all."

Possibly, Josiah was secretly pleased that his children had stood their ground when even the Courcys had fled, but he never dreamt of showing

it. He raged and lectured and told them they should have come home to entertain the Courcys.

"Hang the Courcys," said Alex, smarting now both from the Courcys and from the boy in black who reminded him of them.

In those days it was simply not done to answer back. For that, Alex got the beating that the island boy had failed to give him. He and Cecilia were both sent to bed and not allowed out of their rooms until the afternoon of Christmas Eve. Cecilia passed the time in an agony of worry about their outlaw. She saw him killed in several dozen grisly ways, and she saw him as many times miraculously saved. Part of the time, she spent on her knees, praying for his safety. Alex brooded the while. He brooded on the boy in black and he brooded on the Courcys, until they were all involved in his mind in one great stony hatred.

Not surprisingly, they had a wretched Christmas. Josiah was surly with them, the weather was raw and sleety, and the Courcy party loomed over them. Both of them dreaded it. The Courcys were so superior. Alex knew they had only been invited so that the Courcys could smile at one another and say: "Look how kind we are to those inferior little Hornbys." Cecilia knew how Charlotte and Lavinia would raise their eyebrows at her poor home-made dress. Alex's feelings were not helped by discovering that Josiah was actually going to London on the 27th to see to the Courcys' business affairs. "Why should he do that?" he thought angrily. "He is not their servant."

On the evening of Boxing Day, Alex found Cecilia alone, mournfully sewing away at her new dress in the kitchen. "Cecil," he said, "I don't care if I never see another Courcy again, do you?"

Cecilia looked up eagerly. "Nor I. Alex—" And their plans were made almost in so many words.

Josiah Hornby left early that morning on the London train. His children left a bare two hours later. Things were made a great deal simpler for them than they might have been, because the Courcys always expected them to come early on the day of a party and help with the preparations. All they had to do was to decide to go on horseback instead of in the pony-trap. Miss Gatly made no objection. Old John Britby, the outdoor man, had little to do on the farm that day. He took the trap to Arnforth with Cecilia's dress in it and Alex's best suit. They were delighted that it was Old John. He was not exactly stupid, but he was a man who said so little that no Courcy would ever hear from him what Alex and Cecilia had done.

"Not that they will ask him," Alex said, trotting beside Cecilia on the Arnforth road. "I would bet you five shillings none of them notice we are not there. Is he out of sight yet?"

They looked behind. The bay was still in sight behind them, brown and barren sands under a heavy grey sky. It was threatening to snow. Old John and the trap were out of sight behind the Hornbys' hill.

"Now, quick!" said Cecilia. "Thank goodness there is no snow."

They left the road and cantered down a pasture to the woods beside the river. There they waited until Old John and the trap had gone jingling by above them on the road. Then they turned back towards the bay.

There was a risk that someone in the farmhouse might see them, but it was a risk they meant to take. It was possible that there would be no-one in the front rooms. Miss Gatly's work was done mainly at the back. Cecilia felt she would not turn back even if Miss Gatly herself ran after them across the frozen sands. Alex was not so sure. For him, it was mainly a voyage of exploration and a gesture against Josiah.

"We must hurry," he said, "or the tide will come in as we go."

They picked their way round the edge of the sands, bending their heads in the icy wind, until they could see a way clear towards the island. It was safer on horseback to go to it across the sands, than among the broken rocks of the causeway. At last they were beside the bare swaying trees of the island again, but this time they went round the edge of it.

Alex looked nervously back at the farmhouse. No-one seemed to have seen them. "There must be a way across this bay," he said, "and it must be easy to see. Think of the way those riders went over." He had given up his notions of it being supernatural. That boy he had fought had been hard and real and heavy. He was a solid person who needed a solid road to ride on.

They rode slowly round the island, searching the sands anxiously in the direction those three riders had taken. There seemed nothing but broken sandy banks, icy puddles, rifts and drifts of sea-washed old snow. They became more and more anxious that the tide would come in before they found what they hoped to find.

Then, suddenly, they both reined in and laughed incredulously. There, stretching from their horses' hoofs was a road, a wide, raised ridge of sand, running straight across the bay.

"There!" said Cecilia triumphantly.

"How odd!" Alex said. "Why has no-one else found it?"

"One has to see it from straight on," said Cecilia. "See what happens if you move away."

They moved their horses a few steps back. Cecilia was right. There seemed to be no road. It was lost in a confusion of ridges and sandbanks. They went forward again, and the road was there. Alex laughed again, it was so easy and so extraordinary.

"Hurry," Cecilia said. "The tide."

They set off along the ridge, trotting first, then cantering. By the time they reached the river channel, the tide was coming in. They could see the white line of sea hurrying in from the open mouth of the estuary.

"It is a long way yet," Cecilia called out. "We must gallop."

Indeed, the opposite shore of the bay looked as distant as it had from the island. They galloped. Behind them, the river channel swelled and foamed, and they could hear the sea roaring. Alex caught a glimpse of shining sands on either side, covered here and there with treacherous brittle feathers of ice. He knew it was the quicksands, but their way went straight between them. He and Cecilia galloped on, and neither of them gave a thought to how they would get back, once the tide was in.

They came to the other side just as the sea swirled up to them. There was a steep muddy bank, full of other people's hoofprints. Their horses heaved up it, as glad as their riders to escape the sea, and stood steaming among bushes. Alex stood in his stirrups and saw a wood nearby, and beside it a strange turretted house which he had certainly never seen before.

"Well," he said, rather hushed with amazement, "we are plainly not in our country here. This is all quite different. There ought by rights to be moorland, but there is—almost a castle. It looks empty, though."

"Good!" said Cecilia, and her cheeks were bright red with excitement. "We'll ride inland then. Let us follow this path."

The path led them through the bushes, until it was joined by other paths to become a road, a grassy, moorland road, winding between hills. They judged it must be a main road, because of the number of hoofprints on it. Cecilia determined to keep to it until she found some way of reaching Gairne—for of course it was Gairne she meant to get to. Alex did not mind where they went. All of it was to him the greatest adventure of his life.

Before long, it began to snow. Cecilia, who was looking all the time for someone to ask the way of, was disappointed. Whether because of the snow, or for other reasons, there was no-one about. The road was empty. The hills were deserted. Several times they passed turnings into valleys, one leading to a fair-sized stone village, but they decided to go straight on. There was no-one about in the village and they were shy of knocking at doors. These strange people might all be as unfriendly as the boy in black.

At last, in a long upland, where the snow caught them hard and filled their hair and reddened their faces, they met a shepherd. He looked, to Alex's disappointment, very like the shepherds they knew. He had a

crook and a dog and a small herd of sheep. He was bearded, and he had that withdrawn, solitary look which men have who spend much time alone in the hills. He wore a smock and gaiters and an old blanket on his shoulders against the snow, just as the Hornbys' own shepherd did. The look he gave them could have been astonished, or it could have been just vacant.

"Excuse me," said Cecilia. "Could you tell us the way to Gairne, please?"

The man stared a while. Then he pointed slowly to where the road turned right beside some craggy hills. "There be Gairne road," he said.

"And what lies that way?" Alex asked, pointing to where another road branched beside the hills and led down into a gap or a pass of some kind.

"Falleyfell," said the shepherd.

Both of them gasped. It seemed that they were in Miss Gatly's kingdom of the dead and that it was really true. Alex looked quickly for the shepherd's shadow, but if he had one, the snow obscured it.

"Thank you," Cecilia said quaveringly. "Come, Alex." She set off quickly on the way to Gairne. Alex kicked his horse so hard that the poor beast stumbled in trying to obey him. He felt it was the worst possible omen.

Just as he caught Cecilia up, there were sounds from the road which led to Falleyfell. The snow drowned the horses' hoofs, but they heard talking from a number of people. They kept on their road, looking back rather nervously, and saw a large band of men ride out into the upland. These were not in the least like people they knew. Most of them seemed to be soldiers with wicked spears and dull sheeny helmets and breast-plates. Beneath the armour they all wore the same uniform tunic, banded with brown and dim blue. At their head were two men, not in armour, wearing black and muffled in great hooded capes. The whole party turned and stared at Alex and Cecilia riding self-consciously to Gairne.

"Let us keep on our way," said Cecilia, "as if it were quite natural." She rode staring straight ahead into the snow.

Alex, however, could not help turning to look back every few seconds. The other riders had stopped, which alarmed him a little. He saw the two men in black leaning towards one another, talking, glancing at him. Next time he looked, one, the taller and stouter of them, was beckoning the shepherd. During the next look, he saw the shepherd talking too, looking up at the stouter rider, and making gestures down the Gairne road. At the next look, he saw the whole party riding after them.

"Cecil! I think they're chasing us."

"Maybe they have business this way," Cecilia answered. "Keep on." She was nervous enough, though, to trot her horse. Alex saw the other riders coming faster still.

"Cecil!"

"You there! Stop!"

"Gallop, Alex!" gasped Cecilia.

They galloped, both thoroughly frightened. It was rather like being caught trespassing on someone's land, Alex thought, only worse because this land seemed endless and there was nowhere safe to escape to. Worse still, the riders were catching up rapidly. They all had splendid horses, obviously fresh. Their own were only moderate—Josiah would not trust them with better—and had already come a long way. Cecilia's little mare was dropping behind. Alex could hear her calling it names.

"You lazy beast! You pit-pony, you!"

Then the soft thump of other hoofs was all round them. Snow flew, blurred riders came up and came past. Two soldiers pulled their horses right across the road ahead, crossing their sharp spears to make a further barrier. Alex's horse turned aside and reared. A soldier with a hard brown face caught the bridle and pulled. Alex nearly fell.

"Stop that, will you! I can manage him!"

He saw Cecilia behind him lashing out indignantly at hands trying to take her bridle. He lashed out at the soldier with his crop, but it rang harmlessly on a steel shoulder-piece. His horse plunged and kicked backwards.

"Leave us alone, can't you? What do you want?" he shouted.

"Stand back," someone said. "Let him quiet that vicious jade before you take him." He saw it was the stout man in black. One look was enough to plant that man's face in his mind for the rest of his life. He hated that face absolutely and unconditionally, right from that first look—a fat, evil face with large mauve lips, a nose that was both fat and hooked at once, and dark, unfeeling, unscrupulous eyes. Beside Alex's hatred of that face, his hatred of the Courcys and the boy in black was like nothing or less than nothing.

"My goodness!" he thought. "If this is what people are like here, no wonder they made Robert an outlaw. He must be the only nice one there is."

His horse was easy to quiet. Trim Jim was not in the least a vicious or nervous horse—Josiah had seen to that—only alarmed by the sudden appearance of steel men waving sticks all round him. In a matter of seconds, he was standing calmly, blowing, shaking his ears because of the snow, ready to go where Alex wanted. The soldiers at once closed in round, and round Cecilia too.

The stout man looked haughtily down at them from his tall brown horse. The other man in black blinked at them nervously, full of curiosity.

"Who are you?" said the stout man. "What are you doing here?"

"Riding peacefully along," said Cecilia, "when suddenly people start galloping after us as if we were thieves. Will you kindly let me and my brother ride on at once, please." She felt very brave and very angry and very responsible for Alex.

"That answer is nothing to the purpose, my lady," the stout man said coldly. "I asked your name and your business and it were best for you if you answer me truly."

Cecilia flung back her head and glared at him. He simply waited, in the softly falling snow, looking at her face with those black, unfeeling eyes. And Cecilia was terrified of him. Inside her clothes, she shook with great shudders, and she knew she had gone pale. She was afraid she was going to break down, or faint or scream, and then this man would start looking at Alex and terrifying him. So she pulled herself together, because she was the elder one and she should be in charge.

"Our names are Alex and Cecilia Hornby," she said bravely.

The other man in black, who was thin and excitable, and older than the stout man, old enough to be losing hair at the front of his head—which gave him a high-headed, startled look—turned to the stout man with an unbelieving smile. "I think they are Outsiders, Towerwood."

The stout one went on looking at Cecilia. "I think they are, Darron. I think they are. Which makes it all the more curious that they should ask the way to Gairne." He said to Cecilia: "My lady, I insist that you tell us why you are bound for Gairne. What business have you there? I demand to know. I am the Count of Gairne."

That shook Cecilia badly, and Alex too. They should have known, from many stories, but they had forgotten, that if a man is outlawed, he loses his lands and someone else is given them. What upset them most was that it should be this hateful man, of all people.

"But he is exactly the kind of man who *would* grab land," Alex thought while Cecilia was still dumbfounded. He said to the Count, politely but defiantly: "We asked for Gairne out of interest. We wanted to see what it is like," and guessing completely, he added: "Is it not a famous place?"

The man who seemed to be called Darron nodded eagerly. "Yes indeed. Famous throughout the Principality for the two hills and the Hornets and for fine woollen cloth and—"

"*But*," said the Count loudly, so that Darron jumped, "but you cannot ride there today. Nor can you till the New Year is a week old, by a

decree of the Prince in Council. No-one rides out until then, unless on the strictest business. Your business is nothing, mere sightseeing, and so we stop you in the name of the Prince."

Cecilia had recovered a little by then, enough at least to be angry at the way the Count cut short the other man, who had seemed so friendly and eager to please. "How could we know that?" she said. "We do not belong here. And besides—" looking at Darron— "I am fond of fine woollen cloth."

He bowed in his saddle and smiled at her. "I too, my lady. Visit us later and I will be delighted to escort you to the warehouses of Gairne. But now, unfortunately—" he looked at the Count nervously—"since you were found violating the Prince's decree, it is our duty to escort you to Falleyfell, there to learn the Prince's pleasure."

"But I don't think you can do that," Alex said, very alarmed now that this polite man was turning out to have the same intentions as the other one. "I'm sure you can't. We have nothing to do with your Prince. We are subjects of Queen Victoria."

"That may be," the Count told him, as if the Queen were the smallest and most uninteresting monarch on the face of the globe, "but you are aliens here, in the Prince's realm, and must come before him to give account of yourself." Then, as if the matter were quite settled, he called out orders to the soldiers and rode away in front towards Falleyfell. Darron, bowing again to Cecilia, rode after him. The soldiers fell in all round the two Outsiders. One looked at Alex and jerked his head after the two men in black. There seemed to be nothing to do but ride where they were taken.

"My word!" said Cecilia, "if they do not let us go at once when we have seen this Prince, I shall give someone a piece of my mind."

Chapter 4 – Prince

It is always depressing to have unexpectedly to go back the way one has just come. It is even more depressing to have to go surrounded by soldiers with hard, jeering faces and confront an unknown Prince given to ordering everyone to stay at home.

"He must be the most appalling tyrant," Cecilia thought. "Fancy every poor housewife having to give an account of herself every time she goes shopping, just because the Prince has said so! What a terrible country this is! I shall certainly never come here again."

She looked at Alex, quietly raging beside her. He was so annoyed and alarmed at being arrested—for that was what it must be—that the skin had tightened over the high bridge of his nose. Cecilia nearly smiled at him because he looked so exactly like Josiah. Alex, who thought she was trying to comfort him, stuck out his lower lip at her crossly.

The Gairne road wound back again into the upland. For a minute they rode where they could see hills dimly behind twirling dark snowflakes, and then the soldiers swung round to the right, into that gap in the hills, between crags looking dirtily dark under snow, and out at the top of a long shallow valley.

Cecilia and Alex stared between steel helmets at the great building standing halfway down the valley below them. It was a huge fortified mansion, with castellated walls and innumerable courts and gardens. It could have been a small city, mapped out in charcoal on white paper, with towers drawn jutting and leaping and graceful on every hand. From the highest tower flew the only touch of colour, a green flag with some white device, and half the flagstaff stuck darkly up beyond the green.

The soldier who had jerked his head at Alex nodded down at the mansion. "Falleyfell," he said.

Alex's stomach went tight in a way that nearly made him sick. He could hear Miss Gatly's voice as clearly as if she were riding beside Cecilia: "And Falleyfell is a kingdom out in the bay. So dangerous is it that he who sees it is as good as dead." It helped him not at all to see that the soldiers all made faint blue shadows in the snow, or that they rode making real hoofprints. He could feel the warmth of them about him, horses and men, but that only made it the more sinister. As they went down and down into the valley and the walls of that mansion rose up vaster and vaster in front, Alex was more and more terrified.

They stopped in front of great double gates. People looked down from a gatehouse overhead and seemed surprised because the men in black and the soldiers had returned so quickly. Then the great gates opened. Everyone rode through by threes into one of the biggest courtyards Alex and Cecilia had ever seen. They rode straight across it, with odd muffled echoes, up to the main grand part of the mansion. The men in black dismounted onto a great flight of steps leading to a big door with a snow-crusted coat of arms above it. Both of them turned and waited for Alex and Cecilia to dismount too. Cecilia thought Darron would have helped her down, had not the Count of Gairne held him back. So she looked at them both very haughtily, before she dismounted by herself, and then she picked up the long side of her riding-habit with her most queenly air.

"Up here, my lady," said the Count, not in the least impressed. He and Darron went one on either side of Alex and Cecilia, and two of the soldiers came clinking slowly after.

"Abominable man!" Cecilia thought. "It seems I am everyone's lady here—it must be the custom. How I wish I had not been so nasty to our outlaw about it."

Beyond the steps and the door was a hall, a great square light hall, chilly and gloomy and full of silent people in black. "The court, I suppose," thought Cecilia. Black cloth was hung over the walls, and it, together with the bleak snowy light from the high-up windows, made their eyes ache.

They walked slowly down the hall. At the other end was a raised dais where two women sat, wearing the deepest mourning. The older one was dark, with a white, white face and huge hollow dark eyes, with a strange, wild and beautiful expression. The younger was one of the loveliest ladies Alex had ever set eyes upon. She was so fair her hair was almost white, and everything about her was delicate and small and adorable. She was the kind of lady who is petted and pampered by everyone and too sweet to be spoilt by it all. And yet she was miserable. She sat gazing at nothing, as if someone had put her in her chair like a doll, and she looked so lost and lonely that both Alex and Cecilia wanted to run and kneel beside her and pet and pamper and amuse her.

Neither lady seemed to notice them being brought down the hall, but most of the other sad, black-dressed people did. Ladies stared at Cecilia in an outraged way. Cecilia, flushed with embarrassment and with the cold air outside, tried to look loftily ahead. Alex noticed that most of the men seemed to be trying to catch her attention, to bow and to smile and to nod. They seemed delighted to see her and full of admiration. Alex wondered how they could admire Cecilia, when they had two such women on the dais. He looked irritably at Cecilia. Her riding-habit was lavender blue, to match her eyes. Her ringlets were as brightly fair as the younger lady's and her face was not only rosy and young and happy, it was every bit as worth looking at as either lady's on the dais. For the first time in his life, Alex began to suspect that his sister was growing up into a raving beauty, and it alarmed him. It was one more frightening thing about the sinister black and white place. He glared at all the men who were bowing and smiling in that stupid, admiring way. He wished that he had a sword, as they all did, so that he could put a threatening hand on its hilt.

There was some whispering and quiet bustling. Alex gathered that the Prince was not there and that he was being respectfully fetched. They had to wait for him, just in front of the dais, with the two ladies at eye level. The younger one did not seem to notice them. The older one gave them several quick, wild glances as if she were afraid of staring too long. Alex became more and more frightened, embarrassed and impatient. He took to looking at his feet, and poking one or two lumps of snow from his boots with his whip.

At last he heard mutters of "The Prince," "His Highness, the Prince," "Your Highness," and looked up at the dais. The boy he had fought on the island was standing there, with his hands on his hips, looking down at him in astonishment.

"You again," said the Prince.

He had the most beautiful black eye. Or rather, by this time it was not black any longer, but blue and purple and yellow, with red round the edges. "My goodness," Alex thought, "I did hit him perfectly." Most of his fear and embarrassment vanished. He was so pleased with that eye that he smiled, broadly, and put his hands on his hips too. "Yes," he said. "Me again."

"Good!" said the Prince. "Good." To Cecilia he sounded quite murderous. He stared at Alex in a dreadful, satisfied way, which turned Cecilia cold and faint. Alex stared back, admiring that black eye, cocking his head sideways, almost as if he had painted it on the Prince's face with the finest of brushes.

The Count of Gairne stepped up onto the dais and interrupted their looking at one another. "Your Highness, these people were discovered riding about the countryside in direct contravention of your decree."

The Prince nodded and went back to gazing at Alex. "I am sure they were," he said. "They would be."

The Count leaned down to the Prince, softly, looking at Alex too. "Your Highness, am I right in supposing that this is the person who had the temerity to assault you on the island?" He was almost whispering in the Prince's ear, but not quite. Cecilia, looking up at them, suddenly saw an angry little boy standing on the platform, too angry to notice that a fat, cruel beast was about to seize him, bite him and strangle him. She nearly cried out to the Prince.

Then the Count stood up again and he was simply a stout and unfriendly man, and the Prince was a venomous young person thinking over a dozen awful things he could do to Alex now he had him in his power.

"Remember," said Cecilia, very shrill and loud, because she was so much afraid for Alex, "remember that he did not assault you without provocation. You drew your sword on him—er—Your Highness." Behind her, she heard the courtiers muttering. She was certain they were saying "Dreadful, loud girl," or more stately words to that effect.

The Prince, instead of answering her, turned to the Count of Gairne, with that Courcy-like set of the head that Alex so much detested. "Yes," he said, "they are supporters of Howeforce, it seems, and the boy even imagines that he has a claim to our coronet."

Cecilia wrung her hands, despairing of ever being able to straighten this muddle out. The Count, she saw, was looking at them as if he were

very interested, as if a whole crop of fresh, cold calculations had suddenly come into his head. "Honestly," she said, "you have it all completely wrong!"

"Have I?" the Prince asked her coldly. "Then what were you doing riding to Gairne?"

Cecilia, to her consternation, blushed. She did not know why she *should* blush, but blush she did, on and on, until even her neck was hot. She was so amazed and embarrassed at the way she blushed that she could not say another word.

"You would call them traitors, Your Highness?" suggested the Count of Gairne, still looking calculatingly at them.

The Prince folded his arms. "Indeed, yes." To Alex, he said: "You, I suppose, are by now aware that you have committed an act of lèse-majesté." To Cecilia, he said: "As for you, I am sure you know that your precious friend Howeforce is now terrorising our whole Principality and defying us at every turn."

"No, indeed," Cecilia answered in a whisper.

"Yes, indeed," said the Prince. "It is a pity you are Outsiders. It makes the matter much more difficult. I shall have to keep you locked up while I consider what is to be done with you." Then he looked over their heads and beckoned to people to come and take them away.

People began to come for them. Alex could hear their footsteps slowly advancing from behind. "Look here!" he said, fresh from school history, "don't you have any Habeas Corpus here?"

The Prince frowned and the footsteps stopped. "What," he said, "is Habeas Corpus, in heaven's name?"

"It means," said Alex, "that no-one can imprison anyone else without a fair trial."

The Prince was astonished, in the way that had so maddened Alex on the island. "How can it mean that? The Latin means 'You may have the body,' surely—which is a fair way of saying that you are our prisoner." He beckoned once more, and this time soldiers came, in green liveries heavily banded with black, and surrounded Alex and Cecilia. The Prince smiled. Then he bowed, and, thoroughly enjoying each word, he said, just as he had done on the island: "You may leave us now."

Alex shook with rage. "You—you low-down, mean whelp!" he said. "You give me any more of that and I'll come up there and black your other eye. I'll lèse your majesty until your whole face is black and blue. I'll—" Soldiers took hold of his arms. Courtiers came up with drawn swords. Even the younger lady moved and looked at him in astonishment. "I'll do it to the lot of you," Alex shouted.

The Prince laughed, absolutely delighted with how angry Alex was. "Take him away," he said. "This is wonderful! Lock him up, and his sister too. Oh, Towerwood, I thank you with all my heart for finding these two Outsiders." He turned to the Count of Gairne and shook his hand. The Count smiled, and Alex, in spite of his rage, was frightened, scared so that his spine seemed to ripple, by the way that the Count smiled.

Then they were marched off. To Cecilia's consternation, Alex was taken one way and she was courteously conducted in the opposite direction. She hung back and tried to protest. The young man in charge of the soldiers bowed.

"This way, my lady. The Prince's orders. Pray take my arm." He held out one elbow elegantly to her. Cecilia, looking hopelessly round the soldiers, felt she would have to obey. Reluctantly, she put her fingers on his slender, black silk arm, and, with a last look back at Alex, came the way he took her.

All the way to the room where she was to be locked up, the courtier maddened her and embarrassed her with his politeness. He was young and pink and white and full of irritating elegances.

"Allow me to introduce myself, my lady. I am Hugo Lord Arbard at your service—at your service entirely."

"Thank you," said Cecilia wearily.

"You come at a sad time, my lady—a sad time. We are all in mourning, you understand, in mourning for our Prince who died just before Christmas. Such a man—such a man."

"You must be very sad," Cecilia said.

"Sad!" he exclaimed. "Why, words are too small to express—words fail!"

Cecilia thought: "I wish they would fail."

Lord Arbard showed no signs of words failing him. If he was at a loss, he simply went on saying the same thing until he thought of a new phrase. Then he used the new phrase until he had worn that out. Most of what he said was about the dead Prince. Cecilia would have been interested if he had told her what the Prince had really been like, but all he said was that he had been wonderful, superlative, excellent, good, splendid—and not a word of real description

Then they came to a small room. Lord Arbard bowed and handed Cecilia inside. "With the greatest regret, my lady—enormous sorrow, great regret, I fear I must leave you now. Adieu, au revoir, until we meet again—as I trust we shall."

"Lord Arbard," Cecilia said, thoroughly irritated, "you are really much too polite."

He took it as a compliment. He bowed lower than ever and kissed his fingers to her. "Sweet lady, adieu." Then he shut the door behind him—nor did he forget to bolt it as he went, for all his politeness—and Cecilia was alone in a small bare room. There was one chair, very hard and upright. Cecilia sat down on it and worried for a long time about Alex. She knew how Alex detested the boy in black, and now it was only too apparent that the Prince detested Alex quite as much. Now he had Alex completely in his power, and it looked—since he did not know about Habeas Corpus—that the Prince had absolute power in this strange country. Worse still, she thought, it looked as if he enjoyed his power. She tried to make allowances: he was only about Alex's age—though she felt Alex would have been nicer in the same position—and, of course, he could only have had this power for a fortnight at the most. The Prince, his father, must have been killed the day the outlaw came to the farmhouse.

This took her onto Robert Lord Howeforce. He was supposed to have killed the Prince, of course. His situation was much worse than she had realised. And now he was said to be terrorising the countryside. Cecilia hoped and tried to believe that he was not. But then, she thought, how did she know? She had seen him for an hour or so and she had decided to believe in him. He had looked as if he was telling the truth when he said he had not killed the Prince. But all these people seemed to think he had.

"Oh," said Cecilia. "Have I been very silly?" Then she clapped her hand over her mouth because someone was unbolting the door.

To her utter amazement, it was the elder of the two beautiful ladies. She came hurriedly into the room, wild and wide-eyed, and looked at Cecilia as if Cecilia were a huntress and she some kind of hunted beast. Cecilia, for all her amazement, remembered that this was probably a great lady. She stood up and made her best curtsey.

The lady did not seem to notice. "Madam," she said, in a deep breathless voice, "madam, what brings you and your brother to this land? Is it true you were seeking for Howeforce?"

Cecilia thought: "I might as well admit it. Everyone is probably quite sure we were, anyway." So she said bravely: "Yes, your ladyship. We—we had met him before, you see."

The lady pounced on this. "Met him? How?" Then as Cecilia hesitated, remembering how scornful the Prince had been of the way the outlaw had gone Outside, the lady said impatiently: "You need have no secrets from me. I am Robert's mother. Now tell me quickly, for my time is short."

"His mother!" Cecilia thought. "Then what *is* she doing in the Court?" She curtsied again, and told the lady about the way the outlaw had spent the night at the farm.

"Have you proof?" the lady demanded. "I must have proof, for there is treachery everywhere. This realm is a most perilous place just now and, I fear, will be more so before long."

Then Cecilia, rather shyly, because she felt a fool to have kept it, brought out the paper torn from the book of sermons with the little orange seal on it. The lady took it and looked at it eagerly.

"Yes," she said. "This is Robert's seal. He—Conrad of Towerwood, who calls himself Count of Gairne—he uses the device of the tower. I think I will believe you, girl."

"I am telling the truth," Cecilia said, a little stiffly. "You can see from the printing on the paper. And there is a picture of Queen Victoria underneath."

"Yes, yes," said the lady. "I will take this, so that my son can see it. We must see to your safety and your brother's, girl, for the realm is in deadly danger while Conrad of Towerwood can lay his hands on either of you. Will you trust me with this token?"

"Yes," Cecilia answered reluctantly, "of course." She was not sure that she liked this lady's distracted, high-handed manner; and the way she called her "girl" was uncomfortably like the way Lady Courcy spoke. "Might I have it back, your ladyship, when you have finished with it?"

The lady smiled. It was a comforting, sweet smile, which made her look a great deal less sad and wild. "Of course you may, my dear. I see you value it. You can trust me. I am the daughter of a Prince, the sister of a Prince, and, indeed, the aunt of a Prince. You may trust my word."

"Thank you," said Cecilia humbly. She curtsied again as the lady hurried away and, when she was alone again, she sat down with tears in her eyes. Before long, there were tears all over her face and her handkerchief was soaked. "I see," she thought. "The Prince who was killed was our outlaw's uncle. And he had killed one uncle before. He should have said—he might have told us!"

A little later, a maid brought Cecilia some food on a tray. It looked delicious, but Cecilia did not want it. After a while, another maid took it away, and Cecilia still sat in her chair. Then the short winter day began to be over. There was no light, and the room grew completely dark. Cecilia did not care.

"I wish we had gone to the Courcy party," she said. "This is a judgement on us for being so wicked. Now no-one will ever know what became of us."

Then someone softly unbolted the door. Cecilia bravely stood up. "I am to be led out by night and put to death," she thought. A man came quickly in with a small flickering lantern. He held the light up and looked at her.

It was Robert Lord Howeforce again, changed and stern and commanding-looking in a grey coat of mail. Cecilia put her hands over her mouth and backed away from him. "What do you want?"

Lord Howeforce smiled. "I seem to terrify you every time you see me," he said. "You must come quickly with me—er—Cecilia. You are not safe here. I have searched for your brother too, but he is not to be found. It seems that the Prince has taken him away somewhere. Pray God both of them are safe."

PART II
Riders by Night

Chapter 1 – Murder

The soldiers marching Alex away out of the hall stopped in a large arched passage just outside. Alex gathered that someone had run after them with a message. The soldier in charge was incredulous at whatever it was the servant had said, and sent him back again to make sure. Alex kicked his heels in the passage for quite five minutes while they were running backwards and forwards, whispering and shrugging their shoulders. It did nothing to cool his temper, but it made him a great deal more frightened.

"I suppose they cannot decide which dungeon is deepest and darkest," he thought. "Or perhaps they are fixing the weight of the fetters."

He was very surprised, when he was at length marched off, to be taken up a broad and gracious flight of stairs.

"But this is only crossing to a different wing of the house," he thought, stepping out down a long bridge-like room with windows on either side looking out on courtyards. "Like the Bridge of Sighs in Venice. Prisoners go over that never to return, and they say it is very beautiful." But the soldiers went up more stairs, to heavy carved doors with a leopard ramping in stone above. One took a large key and opened the doors. Another pushed Alex inside. He heard them shut and lock the door behind him, but he was too busy staring to mind.

He was in a chain of rooms. He could see right down room after room for what seemed to him hundreds of yards, and each room was filled to the ceiling with books. It was one of the biggest libraries he had ever seen. Quite bewildered and completely awestruck, he started on the long walk down to the other end. "Millions of books," he thought, as he went, "and they must all belong to that caterpillar." The smell of ancient books was suffocatingly strong, the echo of his steps was muffled in books, and books breathed out a dampness which, before he had half reached the other end, was making him shiver in his shoes.

"There is a door at the other end," he said. "Maybe they have forgotten to lock it. Perhaps there are doors hidden behind the shelves in the walls. Perhaps he had me put here to drive me mad with looking for a way out. Because I can see no reason else why he should put me here."

The door at the other end was locked. Alex rattled it angrily, gave it a kick and turned away. Then he thought he saw the reason why he had

been put there. There was a picture of the Prince propped on an easel just beside that door. It must have been very newly done, since the boy was in black in it, and it smelt of fresh paint. Alex stared at it, and the portrait's wide blue eyes stared back. Alex knew that, now he had noticed it, he would feel those painted eyes staring at him from the whole length of the great library,

"I shall not scrub your eyes out," he told it. "That would be childish, and someone would only have to paint them in again. But I warn you that I shall turn you to the wall if you look at me like that."

There was writing at the top of the picture. Alex bent forward to see it. "Everard IV," he read. "Everard. That is your wretched name, is it?" Then he turned away and began to look at the books. Most of them were very old, some enormously heavy, with beautiful pictures and Gothic lettering. Almost all were Latin, and some Greek. Then he found a wall full of newer books. "Only a hundred years old or so," he thought. He looked at some: histories of the Principality full of battles, burnings, conquests and feuds; long romances in verse he had not the patience to read; and some books of poems. The one which most interested him of these was the poems of Humphrey Lord Tremath. It was a little like Shakespeare and almost pleasantly familiar. Alex sat down on the floor with it, trying to forget how cold he was becoming, and read it from cover to cover.

"I prefer Shakespeare," he said, slapping it shut, and found that he had said it to a hatchet-faced serving-man who was bringing him a tray of food. Alex scrambled up. The man put down the tray, bowed, and went out of the nearest big end door.

The food was excellent, and Alex, unlike Cecilia, had a hearty meal. There was a steaming wooden bowl of jugged hare and another of something cold and white which Alex at first prodded suspiciously. It seemed to be a mixture of chicken and fish, flavoured with herbs. He tried it and found it was delicious. Then there were fresh rolls and white cheese and a silver mug of beer. Alex had never had beer. He found he liked it. There was, too, a bowl of fruit. He read one of the histories while he ate. "This is not so bad," he thought. "I could stay here for a year at least without becoming very bored—I think. Always providing they send me food." Then he remembered his father. He lost his appetite for the big pear he had been looking forward to. "He will think we went into the quicksands," he thought. "Just like Miss Gatly's stories. Perhaps this is what really happened to all the other people who vanished after the Wild Rider was seen."

The idea so depressed him that he walked about, trying to avoid the portrait's eyes. He had just reached the door which he had come in by, when the door at the other end opened. Two soldiers came in, and

began the long walk towards him. Alex started to meet them, but stopped. He had noticed enough about this strange country to know that these men were not in the Prince's livery, the green with mourning bands, which the men who brought him here had worn. These wore the dim blue and brown he had seen with the Count of Gairne.

"Something terrible is going to happen," he thought.

The soldiers came up to him—there was nothing he could do to prevent them—and calmly took his arms. Then they led him out of the library, down more stairs, and out into a small courtyard somewhere at the back of the mansion. Horses were waiting there, most of them with riders in that same blue and brown livery. Alex saw that his own horse was there waiting for him, and another, a splendid grey, with a bridle all stamped with gold leopards. They took him to his horse and told him to mount. Then they all waited, and Alex, cold from the library, grew colder still with apprehension. At last Prince Everard came hurrying out wearing a long black cloak. He gave Alex a satisfied look before he mounted the splendid horse. Then someone opened a gate in the wall and they all rode out into the other end of the valley from the main gate.

"What is he doing with the wrong soldiers?" Alex wondered. "Where are we going?" It seemed to him more dignified not to fuss and ask questions. Obviously, he would find out.

They went towards the hills at the eastern side of the valley, and then up a winding path in the hills. Alex noticed, as they were all strung out on the path, that there was a courtier in black beside the Prince. He thought it was the young man who had so elegantly escorted Cecilia away. Then he looked down into the valley at the great mansion, with the red winter sun hanging over it, and wondered if he would ever see it again.

They did not go very far. After half a mile of slow riding in snowy uplands, the Prince gave the order to halt. The soldiers at once separated and rode a little way off, until Alex, the Prince and the courteous Lord Arbard were left all together in the centre of a wide ring. There was nothing in sight but snowy hills all round. Alex looked at the Prince and wondered what was going to happen.

The Prince surprised him by smiling at him. "Now," he said, "I take it that you have little knowledge of swordsmanship."

"No," said Alex, mystified. "I scarcely know one end of a sword from the other."

"And I," said Prince Everard, "have always been poor with my fists."

Alex realised what was going to happen. "But you can kill me with a sword," he said angrily. "People hardly ever die in a fist fight."

Lord Arbard suddenly spoke up. "Few, hardly ever, rarely—or at least, not at once," he said.

"Be quiet, Hugo," said the Prince. "I know a sword fight would be more dangerous, particularly against an Outsider, so I have been thinking of other forms of fighting wherein we might be more equally matched. Can you wrestle?"

Alex shut his mouth hard to prevent it falling open with his astonishment. He could wrestle. Wrestling was quite a sport in the countryside in those days. "Yes," he said, "but not very well. I am too light to make a good wrestler." And he thought: "But I shall have to try. He will win hands down, being so much bigger."

The Prince looked him over. "I feared you would be," he said. "And the only alternative which came to me was to fight with quarterstaves. Are you able to do that?"

"Yes," said Alex, more than ever astonished at this boy's scrupulousness. "Yes, I can use a quarterstaff." In fact, he rather fancied himself as a quarterstaffsman. He and Ned Gatly had almost weekly duels, and Alex won rather more often than Ned. He wished he were not so cold. One needed warm wet hands for a quarterstaff.

The Prince seemed delighted. "You agree to that, then?"

"Yes, I agree," said Alex.

The Prince dismounted at once. Alex was down more slowly, being so cold. Lord Arbard also got off his horse, carrying two wooden staves. The Prince was undoing his cloak. Alex, rather reluctantly, threw off his cape and unbuttoned his jacket.

"Now," said the Prince, "I shall get my own back. You will see."

"Not if I can help it," Alex answered and began the ritual of spitting on his hands—a very necessary ritual in the snow, he realised.

The Prince suddenly looked up angrily. "Get back, you. I ordered you to stand off."

The soldiers were closing in on them, softly jogging nearer. There seemed two or three times the number there had been. Alex saw the Prince and Lord Arbard exchange alarmed glances and put their hands on the hilts of their swords. Then there were men and horses all round the three of them in a tight ring, and, among them, looming against the red sun, the stout, evil shape of the new Count of Gairne.

Alex stood close beside the Prince and the young lord. In an odd way, he felt on their side—certainly, he would rather be on anyone's side than the Count of Gairne's. He could tell, from the way that the Count was looking at all three of them, that the terrible thing he had been afraid of was happening at last. He wondered if he had ever been more frightened in his life. There were times when he had waited for Josiah to thrash him that he had fancied himself afraid, but they were nothing to this.

The Prince and his friend were frightened too. They gave no sign, but Alex could feel, almost smell, that they were as afraid as he was. The Prince spoke, though, firmly and clearly, as if he were only a little annoyed.

"What is this, Towerwood? You promised me to mind your own business."

The Count laughed. "True, Your Highness, but when it came to the trial, I found I could not allow you to break your own decrees like this."

Prince Everard put his chin up angrily, but his face was very red. "I—"

"No-one," said the Count, "is to ride out, except on the strictest business, until the New Year is a week old. You are ten days early, my lord."

Prince Everard lost his temper, as he had done that time on the island. Alex, seeing him stamp and shake his fist, suspected that it was a thing he did fairly often. "You fat, sneaking toad! Very well, I have broken the decree, but am I not the Prince? Have I not the power to make and break every law in the land?" And so on.

The Count, while the Prince raged, shook his head, with a slow, false pitying smile. Never had Alex hated a smile more. Lord Arbard, seeing that smile, took the Prince's arm and tried to quiet him. Prince Everard flung him off and continued to shout at the Count. But soon, he too was dismayed by that pitying look. He faltered, spoke more quietly and ended up lamely saying:

"I will not be bullied in this way, Towerwood."

Then the Count sighed and answered softly: "Ah, Your Highness, these rages of yours have been your undoing. As we have all feared, you have at last run mad. Here," he gestured round the waiting soldiers, "here are forty witnesses to the fact."

Alex looked round at the soldiers, and so did the Prince, in amazement. Each soldier might have been specially chosen for his hard, cruel face. They sat waiting, holding their long spears, looking down at the three young people standing in the snow, without a flicker of kindness or sympathy in any of their forty faces.

"Nonsense," Prince Everard answered bravely, but his voice was shaking. "Go away, Towerwood. Take your men with you."

"Of course," the Count went on, "no-one who is mad will admit they are so. That is to be expected. But I assure you, Your Highness, you are mad. We restrained you from killing the Outsider, naturally, but in spite of all our efforts, you killed poor young Lord Arbard here."

"What?" said the Prince. Alex saw Lord Arbard, biting his lip, make the sign of the cross on himself.

"You heard me." said the Count. "Come on. Your Highness. Draw your sword. Kill him."

"I shall do no such thing!" exclaimed the Prince. "What do you think I am?"

"You say," said the Count, "you are one who has the power to make and break every law in the land. But—" he laughed—"if you will not kill my lord here, I shall have to do your own bad deed for you." Alex, appalled, watched him slowly draw his sword. "Where did you wound him, Your Highness? Through the heart? In the throat?"

"No!" whispered Lord Arbard desperately, watching the red sunlight on the Count's sword. He was drawing his own sword, but a soldier brought his spear point quickly down and held it against Lord Arbard's wrist.

Alex lost his temper then. He had never met anything so unfair as this. He was not sure he understood half of what was going on, but it was plain that this poor idiot of a young lord was really going to be killed.

"Stop it!" he shrieked at the Count. "How dare you!" He ran at the tall brown horse with his stick raised. At once six spear points descended on him, and he was brought up short with cold sharp steel at his throat. The Count calmly leaned down and took the quarterstaff away from him.

"Ah yes," he said. "You are mad too. No-one doubts that. I see you have a temperament very similar to poor Everard's. Now get out of my way, boy."

Then he killed Lord Arbard. Alex shut his eyes and heard a gasp, a groan, and the heavy sound of Lord Arbard dropping down on the snow. He opened his eyes and saw blood on the Count's sword and the Prince's black eye stark and lurid in his white face.

"Now let us go," said the Count.

Soldiers dismounted. Alex, sick and horrified, stood while they tied his hands together and could not resist when they threw his cape round him and lifted him onto a horse in front of a soldier. Prince Everard, he saw, looked much as he felt, staring down to where Lord Arbard's blood was making a spreading red patch in the trampled snow.

Then they rode off. "Where are you taking us?" demanded the Prince.

"You will see soon enough," said the Count.

The horses went fast across uplands for a long way. Alex looked down at hoofs churning snow and thought that they were leaving prints which would be easy to follow. "And there must *be* someone who will try to follow us," he thought. "After all, he is the Prince."

The sun began to go down. The riders turned towards it and went down to cross a road. Then they went up into hills again, and rode until the sun was a great red disc, level with their eyes. Alex was frozen by this time. The keen winter wind came straight across the hills from the sea with nothing to stop it. He was relieved when they began to go down again, until they reached the shelter of a dim, snow-filled road, winding between hills beside a strong brown river. Here, there were many hoof-prints in the snow. Alex feared that they had joined the road so that their own tracks would be hidden among the others.

Then at last they came to a place where another road turned off to the left. It went over a low stone bridge and then plunged into a high break in the hills. It was almost a gorge, Alex thought. The horsemen turned down this way, and as their hoofs thundered on the bridge, drowning the sound of the river, he heard Prince Everard cry out:

"Oh, not to Endwait! For God's sake not to Endwait, my lord!"

"What better place than Endwait?" asked the Count, "since your father died there too?"

Chapter 2 – Camp

Cecilia followed Robert Lord Howeforce out of the little room. She was not sure any more that she trusted him, but she could not see what else she could do. It was quite likely, too, that he was risking his life, coming into the Prince's mansion to rescue her and Alex. What he said about Alex terrified her. She prayed for his safety as she followed the outlaw softly along passages and down stairs. She was so fearful for Alex, that she forgot to be frightened for herself. So she had an immense shock when a strange lady stepped out of an alcove and took hold of Robert's arm.

"What is it?" she heard him whisper.

"You must see her. She knows you are here and she wishes to see you."

"Why should she wish to see me?"

"She is frightened. She is afraid you wish her ill."

Cecilia did not like this talk of "she." Nor did she much care for the lady, who was young and rather pretty, and took not the slightest bit of notice of Cecilia.

"Come," said the lady, pulling at Robert's arm.

"But, Phillippa," he answered, "I must bring Cecilia. I cannot leave her alone."

"That is your affair," the lady said. "Come." She rustled away down a side-passage. Robert took Cecilia's hand and they both followed, into a large empty room full of comfortable silk chairs and then, beyond a cur-

tain, into a much richer room, light and loaded with silks, tapestries, jewels and crystal ornaments. There, on low chairs, sat Robert's mother and the other, younger lady. Cecilia realised that this younger lady would be the Princess, wife of the dead Prince and mother of the boy in black.

The Princess was crying. "What have you done now, you wicked man?" she said to Robert. "Where have you taken my son? Why do you persecute us like this? Why not proclaim yourself Prince at once and have done?"

"Madam," answered Lord Howeforce, "I have not seen your son. I am as concerned as you to know where he may be."

"How you lie," said the Princess. "How you lie! You have him prisoner, or you have killed him, and tomorrow you will cry yourself Prince through the whole country—just as you cried yourself wronged on Christmas Day."

"Madam," repeated Lord Howeforce, "I have not seen your son. I have no knowledge of his whereabouts. If I had, I assure you—"

"—You would have killed him before this," the Princess finished for him, and put her face in her hands.

Robert's mother looked up at him. "It is impossible to persuade her," she said. "Robert, it is true you do not know where Everard is, is it?"

"Quite true, I assure you."

"Then," she answered, "you must have spies out and enquiries made and not rest till you have found him, and the Outsider. She will not believe your innocence, nor will anyone, until the Prince is found."

"I will try to find him."

"We can guess where he is," answered his mother. "Now go, please, and make sure at least that this girl is safe." And as Cecilia, who had stood by a little resentfully all the while, curtsied to her, the lady smiled. "We are in your debt for a night's lodging," she said, and held out a small dog-eared piece of paper with the little orange seal stamped on it.

After this, Cecilia again crept after the outlaw through corridors and courts in the great mansion. As she went, she thought how strange the outlaw's position was. If she had been the Princess, she would have called soldiers and had him arrested even though he was her nephew. "So all I can think," she said to herself, "is that the Princess is not as sure as she pretends that he *is* so wicked. I wish I knew all there was to be known about how the Prince was killed. I think there must be much more to it than we have learnt."

They came to a tiny side gate, outside in a bitter frost. There was a chilly guard there in green livery who raised his lantern to look at them. Cecilia was terrified, but the outlaw smiled and clapped the guard on the shoulder.

"Many thanks, Tom. Has the true guard come to his senses yet?"

"Aye, my lord. Had to gag him."

"Then ungag him. He may shout all he likes now. Then follow us where you may wear your own livery again."

"I have it underneath this, my lord. Comes warmer like that." Then the man, whistling merrily, and not at all secretive, went over to where Cecilia could see the wriggling shape of the real guard. "Come on, you," he said. "I'll give you five minutes to get clear, my lord." As Robert unbolted the gate, Cecilia saw the false guard heaving the real one along to where he would be seen in a white bar of moonlight.

Beyond the gate were empty fields of snow, hardening in the frost. In the great black shadow of the walls was a clinking and movements. Robert took her that way. There was a group of horses, breathing out steam, with riders in steel and a faintly glowing orange livery—Cecilia thought it was orange, but in the moonlight it could have been brown.

"I fear we have no side-saddle for you," Robert whispered.

Cecilia laughed. "I prefer riding astride. It is easier. But you must not stare at me."

He seemed relieved. Cecilia was helped into her saddle by a soldier, while the outlaw mounted the same blue-grey horse they had seen him ride across the bay. Then the group set off at a sharp trot, over the frozen fields, westwards, and up into the hills.

Everyone was very gay, even Cecilia, despite her fears for Alex. She was thankful to be out of Falleyfell and delighted at the moonlight ride. The men around sang and whistled and were plainly heartily pleased to have their leader back out of the mansion. After about a quarter of an hour, Tom, the false guard, caught them up, and he was merrier than any of them. Cecilia took to him completely. He had a little curly black beard which thoroughly caught her fancy.

"I can turn Hornet again now, my lady," he said to her, twirling his moustache.

"Whatever is a Hornet?" asked Cecilia.

They all exclaimed that she did not know. "Us—we be Hornets."

"The orange livery," Robert explained, "with the two black stripes. It is the true Gairne livery, and famous in the Principality. It is as old and honoured as the Prince's green, or the Darron white and red."

"And we be honoured to wear it," said Tom. "So all of us turn outlaw too."

"Oh, I see," said Cecilia, and thought how nice they all were to go as far as that.

They rode on, and after a while, Robert asked her seriously: "Did the Prince give no indication of his intentions towards your brother? If

we knew what he meant to do, we could more easily discover where they are."

"Well," said Cecilia, "he looked daggers at Alex out of his black eye—Alex had blacked his eye on the island, you know."

Robert laughed. "No, I did not know. Poor Everard! He would take that very ill. Then I begin to see something of what happened. There would be a return fight, I am sure, but it need not have been far from Falleyfell. This makes me certain that Towerwood left in order to follow them, though I was told he had gone to Gairne."

"Oh, no!" said Cecilia.

"I fear so," said Robert. "I will send spies down to Gairne and Towerwood as soon as we reach our camp. They should discover something. I am glad you told me of this fight, since I had been wondering if Everard had not gone to Landerness—he went in that direction, it seems."

This spoilt the rest of the ride for Cecilia, though they rode where they seemed on top of the world and the soldiers were as merry as ever.

She revived a little when they came to the camp. It was where an outcrop of rock leant over a high, shallow valley. There were caves in the rock, with lights in them, and tents pitched near the caves. Fires melted circles of snow and flickered on lines of picketed horses. Several young men in long cloaks came running out to meet them beside their own strange blue shadows. They ran back with the horses, calling greetings, and asking for news. When the riders stopped near the tents and Cecilia had dismounted, Robert introduced the young men to her. Cecilia was a little bewildered by them all, but she gathered that the one with the long nose was called Rupert Lord Strass, and that the very young dark one was Robert's squire, and that his name was James of March. Robert went with them all to one of the caves, talking as he went. They seemed very dismayed to hear that the Prince had vanished.

"Towerwood," said James of March.

"Surely," Robert agreed. "Now my eyes are opened to that man, I believe him capable of anything." Then he laughed. "Then I was called before the Princess, and she and my mother were unspeakably indiscreet. And there stood Phillippa of Towerwood hearing every word." He turned to Cecilia. "Did you notice how indiscreet they were?"

"No indeed," said Cecilia. "I—I was angry at the way they thought it was all your doing. How were they indiscreet?"

"Perhaps it was not so obvious then," he said. "I hoped it was not, since I can do little for them and Towerwood can do them much harm. The Princess as good as told me to declare myself Prince before Towerwood seized the coronet for himself."

"You should take her advice," said James of March. "You are next in succession, and you are of age."

Robert laughed, as if his squire had said a very stupid thing. Cecilia liked him enormously for the way he laughed. It made her trust him at last, completely. "Oh, James," he said, "let us have no more troubles than we already bear. Poor Everard is no doubt finding enough heaped on his head, as it is. Now, let us eat. Cecilia, I cannot offer you tea."

Cecilia laughed and blushed. They had an excellent meal at a proper table in the cave, with a charcoal brazier to warm them and wine to drink. While they ate, Cecilia had to explain tea to Lord Strass, who seemed serious-minded and anxious to learn. While she explained, there was constant coming and going, and Robert left to give orders about spies to go to Gairne.

"We should know by the morning," he said, when he came back.

Then Cecilia became very sleepy, what with the wine and with her day's adventures. She wondered what she would do for a bed. The cave was bare and rocky, with rushes on the floor. She hoped fervently that she did not have to sleep on rushes. It seemed, from what they said, that the outlaws all did. But then she found, rather to her embarrassment, that most of the coming and going had been to make ready a tent, entirely for her.

"I wish," said Robert, "that we could provide you with a maid, but you are the only lady here."

"Good heavens!" said Cecilia. "I have no maid at home! Why should I need one here?" She could have bitten her tongue off after she said that. In her anxiety to seem pleased with all they were doing for her, she had embarrassed Robert again, just as she had on the farm. The light was too poor for her to see whether or not he was blushing, but he did not seem to know what to say. All the others, seeing that he was put out, were embarrassed as well, except James of March, who scowled at her. The rest of them all looked at the cave roof, or out of the entrance at the frosty stars, until Cecilia hardly knew what to do with herself.

"May—may I see the tent?" she said at last.

"I will show you there," Robert answered, and things seemed all right again.

Cecilia was delighted with her tent, and was careful to tell Robert so. They had found a camp bed and a mirror for her, and a bowl to wash in. There were a great many blankets and an orange cloak in case she was cold. There was a carved ivory comb for her hair, and even a spray of evergreen leaves in a little clay vase. "This is extremely kind," she said. "What trouble you have gone to."

When, however, she was left to herself in the tent, she found it more difficult to go to bed in than she had expected. She had never slept in a tent before. The nearness of people outside frightened her, until she realised that what she could hear were four guards walking up and down to keep her safe. Then, although she had no maid at home, there was always Miss Gatly to help. When it came to undressing, Cecilia found she could not bear to try, all by herself. They had not found any nightclothes, either, so she would have had to sleep in petticoats.

"My habit will be ruined," she thought, "but it will just have to be. And my hair will be wild in the morning, although it curls of itself." At home she had Mary-Ann, who was good with hair and was called in by the Gatlys too for big occasions. "After all," said Cecilia, "this is camp-life."

So she went to bed and slept at last, very uneasily, with wild dreams of danger to Alex and to Robert. Her worst nightmare was almost at dawn, when she dreamt that Conrad of Towerwood was walking towards her with a sabre like a Saracen's, and driving her into the quicksands in the bay. She stepped backwards and backwards, whatever she did, and, just as the quicksands closed softly over her head, she awoke to hear trumpets blowing. She sat up, hot and frightened from her dream. People were running about. She heard horses neighing. Then someone came to the door of her tent.

"Cecilia."

She recognized Robert's voice. "Yes," she said.

"Will you come out as fast as you can? Conrad of Towerwood is riding up to attack us and you are not safe there."

Chapter 3 – Dungeon

Alex saw little of Endwait. It was nearly dark when they came out into the valley beyond the gorge, so that all he gathered was the vaguest impression of a deep enclosed space. Somehow, he knew that it was a cultivated, fertile valley, full of fruit trees and prosperous cottages, and he heard the noise of the waterfall which shone in the snow at the other end. It was not so cold in the shelter of the hills. The snow had scarcely settled on the road through the village, nor much on the boughs of the great trees beyond. Under the trees it was dank and unechoing and Alex's heart sank. Then he saw a house, set back under the hills, a large house, or a small castle, he was not sure which,

"A castle," he decided, as they halted outside. It had a dark, glinting, unfrozen moat, and people inside were lowering a drawbridge. The clank and rattle of the chains on the bridge made Alex so frightened that

his teeth chattered. They reminded him of all he had ever read of dungeons, fetters and racks.

The drawbridge was down, with a crash, leaving open a dark archway lit by a flaming torch in a bracket. The Count of Gairne and his soldiers rode with them, thundering, into the archway, past the flare, and into a tiny dark courtyard. Behind them, gates were banged and the drawbridge came clanking up again.

The soldier behind Alex dismounted and roughly pulled at Alex's leg. "Get down, ye Outside thing, ye." Alex slid off the horse as well as he could, using his elbows for balance because his hands were tied. All round him soldiers were coming off horses in a clashing and jangling of mail. He had a glimpse of Prince Everard being pulled down by the scruff of his neck. Alex stood in the dark among the soldiers, shaking with cold, while other people led away the horses. He could see the Count of Gairne a little way off, under a light, giving orders. Then the Count came striding back towards them. Alex tried to stop shaking.

"They will think I'm frightened," he thought, "and I am not—I am *not*."

The Count said: "They have the dungeon ready. Take them away."

The soldiers wheeled and marched, away from the light, into a deep dark archway. There were stairs almost at once, and Alex stumbled. Someone lit a lantern, which swung great shadows around on thick stone walls. There was a massive door unlocked downstairs ahead, and when they came through that, more stairs. This time the light glistened on the walls, streaming wet from the moat outside. Then there was a lower, narrower door, which took time to unbar. The soldiers did not go inside. Two of them took Alex, untied his hands and pushed him through. Alex, remembering that dungeons were always deep, had the presence of mind to jump as they pushed him. He landed on his hands and knees in damp straw some three feet lower down and had to scramble hurriedly out of the way as they pushed the Prince in after him. Above them, the door thumped shut. Bolts screeched home, and the chains of padlocks rattled. Then, very faint and distant, Alex heard the feet of the soldiers marching away.

He stood up then, and felt his way across the dungeon. It was quite spacious, some five long strides to the end from where he had been kneeling, and the floor was deep in fresh-seeming straw. The wall, when he reached it, was wet, much wetter than the walls they had passed earlier, and, since it was so cold outside, the water running down was icy. Alex took his hands away with a shudder and turned round again.

It was lighter than he had expected. High out of reach in a side wall, there was a tiny grating which must have been just above water-level beside the moat. Alex guessed this, because the light it let in was a vague

beam of moonlight which wavered and moved on the wet wall. It was not the direct light of the moon, but its reflection in the moat. And it allowed him to see the paleness of the straw and the black figure of Prince Everard, his white hair and his whiter face.

The Prince was standing leaning against the wall near the door, as if he had hardly moved since the door closed. Alex realised—suddenly, as if someone had pushed a cold sponge into his face—that, while his own position was desperate enough, the Prince's was not only hopeless but horrible. His father had been killed, and killed, it seemed, in this very place; his friend had just been murdered before his eyes; and, since the Count of Gairne was able to do this to him, it looked as if he had not another friend he could rely on in the whole Principality.

"How terrible!" Alex thought. "I can at least think of home, or school or the Gatlys. I can think of father, or even the Courcys, but I should not imagine he can have a pleasant, homely thought in his head." He felt so strongly sorry for the Prince, that he tried to think of something comforting he could say. This was difficult, though, since, now he came to think about it, he scarcely knew him. A remark on the dungeon might have to serve, he supposed, and he was just about to say how damp it was, when the Prince spoke.

"If only," he said, "if only I did not dislike you so much, I could bear all the rest."

All Alex's sympathy vanished. He put his hands in his pockets and strolled under the grating. "You sound as if you want another black eye," he said. "Or would you prefer me to punch your nose?"

"Boast away," said the Prince. "The advantage is yours, but if they had not taken my sword away, it would be mine."

"Oh," said Alex nastily, "I have a clasp-knife in my pocket." He waited to see if the other boy would make peace at that, but he said nothing. So Alex added airily: "I will lend you it, if you like, but I would still beat you."

The Prince did not answer. Alex turned round from the grating and saw that Everard had his arms against the wall and his face in his arms. Again Alex felt sorry for him, and was irritated that he should feel sorry. He sat down in the straw, with his chin on his knees, and concentrated on feeling sorry for himself. He was badly off enough. His father returned from London in two days' time, and by that time everyone would have given Alex at least up for dead. Then, suddenly, it struck him that they would probably be right to give him up for dead, and he found that he was going to be in tears any second. He would have cried his eyes out then, with Everard standing there, if someone had not begun unbarring the door.

Alex jumped up at once. The Prince came quickly away from the wall and they both, as if they were guilty, turned to look up at the door. It swung open, and the Count of Gairne stood above them, holding up a lantern whose feeble flame dazzled them both. Alex put his fingers hopefully round his clasp-knife, but when he saw soldiers behind the Count, he let it go again.

The Count looked at the Prince and spoke as if Alex were not there. "Your Highness, I have come to explain what you have to expect at my hands. I felt I should do you this courtesy before I go to make an end of your cousin Howeforce."

"And what have I to expect?" Everard asked.

The Count smiled his terrible smile. "This, Your Highness—certain starvation."

The Prince looked at Alex. "But he—"

"Precisely," said the Count. "While you both live, you shall be given just so much food as will keep one of you body and soul together. Not a crumb more. If you take food, then the Outsider will have died at your hands, to the ruin of the whole realm. Will you take food, Your Highness?"

One of the soldiers came into the doorway carrying a plate and a tiny mug.

"Take it, Alex Hornby," said the Count. "This is all you will get until tomorrow."

"You fiend!" said the Prince. "You monstrous devil! Fetch it, Alex, in heaven's name, fetch it."

Alex felt him kick his leg, urgently, as if there was some meaning in what he said. He shuffled forward uncertainly, realising that there was something he did not understand which was very important to both him and the Prince. As he put out his hands and took the plate and mug, it dawned on him what it was. But it was too late. His hands were full and the door was slammed in his face. Light came through a square barred opening, and he saw the Count looking down at him through it.

"You must explain matters to your enemy here, Your Highness. He did not see why you kicked him. He must understand why it is his duty to starve you. And now, farewell. I am going first to propose marriage either to your mother or your aunt—I care not which one accepts me, for either gives me claim to the coronet—and then to exterminate your cousin the outlaw. I will come back in a week, by which time I hope you will be dead or mad indeed. Goodnight to you both."

The square hole slammed shut, bolts and chains rattled, and the two of them were alone again in the dungeon.

Alex turned round from the door, still carrying the cup and the plate, ready to kick himself or scream with anger. "I—I am sorry," he said. "Is it—is it really true that no-one would dare kill me?"

"Alas, yes," said the Prince. "I wish I had warned you. I saw you did not understand." He turned away from Alex and sat down in the straw. "If any of us in this realm," he said, "should kill anyone from Outside, then it is an end of all—every man, woman or child of us."

"Are you sure?" Alex demanded. "How can you know?"

"It is written," answered the Prince, "and every living soul here knows it. The death of an Outsider at our hands brings ruin to this realm. Some say we would all melt like snow, others that we fall dead at that moment the Outsider dies. I do not know, but it is certain that no-one here would dare to kill you."

"And I had my knife in my pocket!" said Alex. "I took hold of it and let it go, because I thought it was no use. I did not see what he meant until it was too late."

The Prince said: "You would certainly have been wounded. But they would not dare wound you badly. It is a pity I had not told you, because you might have made an end of that monstrous man. How is it I never guessed what a fiend he is?" Then he flung his head up irritably. "Eat that food. Stop standing there with it."

Alex looked down at what he held. On the plate was a slice of bread and the mug was half full of what he guessed was water. He was hungry after the long ride through the snow, but by no means ravenous. The lunch he had eaten in the library had been too good, though he wished now that he had eaten that pear. "I am not very hungry," he said. "We can share this."

Prince Everard moved sharply away from him. "No," he said. "*No!* Eat it, drink the water. Do you not understand? I dare not let you starve."

"But I am not starving. I had an excellent meal at Falleyfell. No-one starves in a few hours, you fool! Let me give you half of this."

"Eat it," Everard repeated, and put his face on his knees.

Alex, wanting to shake him, wishing that there had been a spiny bush to throw him into, brought the food and knelt down beside him. "Come on. Have half of this."

"I am not hungry."

"Yes, you are. Or you will be by morning and I shall certainly not be dead by then. We ought to share what they give us until we are really starving, at least."

"No," said Everard, with his face still on his knees.

Alex sighed. He had never in his life met anyone so pig-headed as this Prince. "Can you not understand," he asked, "how I would feel, let-

ting you starve beside me?" Everard did not answer. Alex gave up that line of argument and tried another. "People," he said, "can survive on very little food for months, certainly for weeks. Maybe you will be rescued within a week. Our troop of horses left tracks as plain as a pikestaff most of the way here, did you not notice? You must have some friends who would follow them until they found where you are. You owe it to them not to starve before they can set you free."

He heard the straw rustle as the Prince moved, and felt he was making an impression at last. "I have no friends," said Everard.

"You must have," Alex cried out, exasperated. "Think!"

"I have not. Do you think I have not been thinking? I have considered every soul in the Court, and of those who are not Towerwood's creatures, half hate me for the sake of Howeforce and the rest will believe I am truly mad. I tell you I have no friends. Now eat your food."

Alex could not eat after that news. Even if he had been unfeeling enough to let the Prince go without food, he could not have eaten a morsel. He sat in the straw beside the plate and mug and despaired. So they would not be rescued. Cecilia, even, could be of no help, since, as far as Alex knew, she was a prisoner in Falleyfell still with no means of knowing where he was. He was left to face this truly horrible situation alone for at least as long as it took a person to die of starvation.

Alex shook with misery as he thought it out. Everard did not dare to eat for fear of killing him. If Alex died, so did everyone else in this country. This meant that Alex was to be a murderer, whatever he did. He could let Prince Everard starve, and he would have killed him; or they could both starve and both die, taking along with them every single one of Everard's subjects. That was unthinkable, but so was it unthinkable for Alex to sit here in the straw taking every scrap of food out of Everard's mouth. He agreed with Everard on one thing at least: Conrad of Towerwood was a monster, an utter, diabolical monster.

Prince Everard flung round in the straw. "Eat that food—please!" he implored.

"I can't," said Alex, and another possibility struck him, coming to him out of his despair. "I shall not eat. I will starve voluntarily. Then no-one will have killed me, and everyone will be all right."

Everard almost shrieked at him. "*No!* For aught I know that is quite as bad. In heaven's name, are you talking like that to torment me? Conrad of Towerwood did better than he knew, shutting us together here—for you will certainly drive me mad. You talk temptations like the Devil himself."

Alex was quite taken aback. It had not occurred to him that the Prince found him as maddening as he found the Prince. He was unable

to answer, and, meanwhile, Everard went onto a new side of his miseries.

"And while I sit here listening to your evil arguments, that monster of a Towerwood is forcing my mother to marry him. To think of that!"

"Or your aunt," Alex reminded him, trying to say at least one thing which would not strike the Prince as evil.

"Oh, my aunt!" said Everard. "She would take poison sooner. He knows that as well as I. So, it will be my mother who accepts, for she has always loved life, nor is she used to being bullied."

Alex remembered the lovely fair-haired lady. Everard looked enough like her for Alex to know she was his mother. He was afraid Everard was right. She was too pampered to stand up to a nasty man like the Count, Alex was sure. He wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"Alex," Everard said, in a different calm voice. "Alex, I pray you, lend me that clasp-knife you have in your pocket. I shall not need it for long."

Alex at once put his hand over the knife and held it tight. There was something very alarming about Everard's sudden politeness. "Why?"

"Why? Because I wish to make an end of myself, of course. Surely you see I have reason enough?"

Alex got up onto his knees and shuffled away backwards, still holding the knife tight.

"No!" he said desperately, "you are not to do that. It is wrong. Aren't you brought up Christians here?"

Everard moved after him through the straw. "I am as good a Christian as you are, but I would rather burn in Hell than live through this coming week. Give me the knife, please. I beg you."

"I will not. It may not be as bad as you think. You must not be so wicked."

Everard came crawling forward again. Alex, thoroughly frightened, stood up and backed away. "Please," Everard said. "I am imploring you."

"Not with my knife," said Alex.

Everard stood up. "Give me that knife, you puling fool! They will let you go free once I am dead."

"Even if they made me king of all the world," Alex answered, "I would not give you my knife. Can you not take no for an answer?"

"You promised to lend it me."

"Not for this."

"Give it me!" Everard shouted, and when Alex did nothing but back away again, he rushed at him. Alex went over heavily sideways with one hand still in his pocket. But once he was down he had to free his hand,

with the knife still clenched in it, to defend himself from the Prince's furious rage. He was terrified. He had never known anything like it. He thought Everard really was mad. He prized the Prince's hand off his throat only to have his head banged on the floor. Then he had to defend the knife, and while he struggled to get away, Everard kicked him and bit him.

"I see why the courtiers think he will go mad," he thought.

They rolled and struggled from end to end of the dungeon. The straw was pushed aside and they rolled in the wet mud beneath. Alex broke away and nearly stood up, but Everard took him round the knees and they were down again and fighting. Twice the Prince nearly twisted the knife out of Alex's fingers and Alex only saved it by biting too.

"Well, it has come to wrestling after all," Alex thought, trying to break out of a lock on his arm. The Prince was so much bigger that he would have won even if he had abided by the rules of wrestling, which he certainly did not. Alex took to mixed fighting, and hit Everard whenever he got a chance.

This was a bad mistake. Everard gave a little before Alex's punches, particularly when the punches were weighted with the heavy clasp-knife, but it changed his hot rage into a cold, thinking anger. He let Alex roll away and scramble up, then he dived on him and brought him down again, this time completely at his mercy. It was some kind of hold Alex had never experienced before. He felt the bones in his neck grate and he thought his left arm was broken. He shut his eyes and hung onto the knife in his right hand for dear life.

"Now," said Everard, "I can break your neck if I wish. Give me the knife or I will try."

Alex believed him. He said, with lights dancing in the top of his head, as if someone were holding a lantern just out of sight: "Why not do it? That is quite as good a way to commit suicide." He felt Everard loose him a little at this hint, but it did not help matters much. Alex kept his knife-arm stretched out, as far away from Everard as possible. The Prince needed both hands to hold him, so he could not get at the knife unless Alex gave it him. Alex tried some more cunning. "Let me get up first. You can have the knife then."

"I am not such a fool as that," said Everard and made a small, almost experimental movement. Alex yelled. Everard loosed him again, as if he were alarmed, but Alex was past caring.

"Everard, for heaven's sake, let me go!"

"Give me the knife then. Why do you call me Everard?"

"Isn't that your name?"

"Yes, but only my friends call me that."

"Let me go! You really are breaking my neck. I'll call you anything you like. Humpty-Dumpty if you want."

"Why Humpty-Dumpty? Because he had a great fall? You—!"

Alex said: "Fancy knowing Humpty-Dumpty and not Habeas Corpus! *Oh!*" This time he really screamed, and it must have frightened Everard because he let him go. Alex frantically rolled away and staggered onto his feet. Everard slowly came after him again. Alex panicked. The only way to stop Everard seemed to be to get rid of the knife. The only safe place was that high moonlit grating. Just as the Prince reached him, Alex jumped up and threw the knife.

He never expected it to go through, but it vanished between the bars and he heard it plop heavily into the moat outside. Then he and Everard stood in the wavering band of light, staring at one another. The Prince had come to his senses again, Alex could see from his face.

"This is a lesson against despair, is it not?" said Everard. "I am sorry, Alex. That was our only weapon."

"I know," Alex answered wretchedly. "I am sorry too." Then, bracing himself, in case there was another attack, he added, "I—I did not mean anything by Humpty-Dumpty. I just said the first thing which came into my head!"

"Yes. I believe that," Everard answered soberly. "When I learnt that hold from Robert, I hardly knew what I was saying. Let us look for that bread. We should eat it."

But they had destroyed the bread. They searched for it all over the floor, and all they found was the broken plate and the spilled mug.

Everard said bitterly: "If I do not learn now not to lose my temper, I shall never learn."

Alex crouched down on the trampled floor, fingering a muddy breadcrumb. "Very fine moralising," he thought. "I suppose there is a lesson for me too in this. I lose my temper almost as badly as he does, certainly as badly as Cecilia—only I never admit it." But he was too cold now to care about his character or the Prince's. While they had fought he had been warm, too hot in fact, but the sudden heat had gone away. The damp of the dungeon struck right through him, and icy draughts came through the grating. Outside there, it was freezing hard, even in the sheltered valley of Endwait. His teeth were beginning to chatter.

Everard came up to him. "I am cold too," he said. "We must heap this straw together over us and try to keep warm. That is, if—"

"If what?"

"If you do not mind. If you will believe that I will not try to break your neck again."

This made Alex give a chuckle that was half a shiver. "Next time I shall insist on a fist-fight and then I might have a chance." And Everard laughed too. It cheered Alex no end to find that the Prince could laugh. Then he discovered, as they scraped up a mound of straw and hollowed it out in the centre, that Everard even made jokes.

"A jail-bird's nest," he said and flapped his arms and jumped into the hollow with a squawk. Alex giggled as he settled in beside him.

For the first ten minutes they thought they were getting warm. Then Alex's teeth began to chatter again. There was so little feeling in his feet that he wondered if he had not got frostbite.

Everard said: "We shall not be warm until we think of something else beside how cold we are. We must talk. Tell me of the history of your country."

Alex did his best. Between chattering teeth, he began at random on the Wars of the Roses. Everard was enthralled. He exclaimed, he offered advice to the long-dead kings, and he took sides in a way which would have shocked Alex's schoolmaster, but which quite delighted Alex. "By the time we are both dying of hunger," he thought, "I shall like him tremendously." He realised he was a great deal warmer.

Then Everard told histories of the Principality. He told them in the same formal manner that Miss Gatly used, and Alex was enthralled in his turn. "Now," said Everard, "I will tell you the story of Prince Geoffrey the Good and of Eleanor. Eleanor was an Outsider and her name was Eleanor de Courcy—"

"I say," Alex interrupted, "did she live near here? I know some people called Courcy. Could they be some relation?"

"Maybe," said Everard. "Some part of Eleanor's lands bordered this realm, but some lay far away. Prince Geoffrey went a hundred miles to interrupt her wedding."

"Yes, they owned lands all over England once. They must be her descendants."

"They cannot be. She was my ancestor. She married Prince Geoffrey in spite of all her father said."

"Tell me," said Alex, and as Prince Everard began on the strange story, he thought: "I suppose this is my lesson—that I should not have been disobedient. I should have gone to that party. But then, if I had, poor Everard would have been here all alone."

Chapter 4 – Armies

Cecilia came out of her tent into the middle of a council of war. Robert was standing just outside in the crisp frozen snow talking hurriedly to his friends. Half of them were holding their horses ready to mount. Cecilia could see swinging stirrups, arching necks and trampling hoofs all round in the dim morning light. As she came, Robert, and all the others, turned and greeted her cheerfully, and then went straight back to their hasty talk. All round, beyond them, the outlaws in the camp were running and riding, chattering and shouting, making ready for battle. To Cecilia's surprise, everyone was merry—as if they were delighted to be dragged up on a frosty dawn to fight for their lives.

Lord Strass was laughing. "Then I'll attack their right wing. That will be Darron, as far as we know. Good. Should James come with me?"

"Yes," said Robert. "His father is with Towerwood in the centre."

"No," said James of March. "Send me against Moyne on the right."

"We want Bress there, James. Go with Rupert," Robert answered. "No, please do not argue. Now, one thing worries me. Since Darron is there, Towerwood must be attacking in the Prince's name, and it is possible that he has Everard with him somehow. You must all make sure that the Prince is not hurt, if he is there."

The others all gaily agreed, but Lord Strass said: "How are you sure that this is in the Prince's name? Darron is becoming more Towerwood's creature every day. Tremath is not there—and he would be, if this were for the Prince."

"Then we can look for Tremath in reserve, later," said Robert, "for I am sure. I know Darron and I begin to know Towerwood."

Then a bugle sounded. To Cecilia, trembling at the thought of a fight, it was like the screech of a slate-pencil and set her teeth on edge. The others were all delighted. Lord Strass threw his cap in the air, James of March shouted "Hurrah!" and mounted his horse, and most of them rode or ran laughing away. Robert was laughing too as he turned to Cecilia, but he stopped when he looked at her.

"You are frightened!" he said, and sounded surprised.

"Yes," said Cecilia. "Suppose you all get killed."

"We have little else to look for," he told her, still not seriously enough for Cecilia. She was almost angry with him for being so light-hearted. What he said next made her really indignant. "But I have arranged for you to be in safety on the hill. You will have a good view when the sun comes up."

Then he hurried away before she could be angry, and Tom, the false guard of the night before, was left twirling his moustache and smiling at her. "Come, my lady," he said. "We had best get to our post."

"We had best not," said Cecilia. "I have no desire to see the fighting."

"Ye need not look," Tom said, "but ye must come. We cannot have ye killed, my lady—being a lady and an Outsider as ye are."

"I am not really a lady," said Cecilia. "And why does it worry you that I am an Outsider? It does not worry me."

The bugle sounded again. Another bugle answered it, a different call, from further away. Tom did not let Cecilia argue any more. He picked her up, tossed her over one shoulder, and set off up a steep path beside the caves. Cecilia furiously beat his back with her fists and drummed on his mailed chest with her toes. "Let me down, you beast!"

Later, Cecilia did manage to laugh at herself, but at the time she was too angry. She drummed and protested all the way. It grew suddenly lighter. She realised that the sun had risen and that probably all the outlaws and even Conrad of Towerwood could see her being carted up the hill like a sack of coals. She was furious. Tom, panting like one of the great express engines which ran daily past the farm, tried to explain as he went what Everard had explained to Alex about Outsiders.

"Be quiet. I will not listen," Cecilia kept saying, but before the top of the hill she had taken in enough of what he said to be frightened. "Put me down!" she said instead. Behind her, far below now, a voice was shouting across the snow. She thought it was Conrad of Towerwood calling on the outlaws to yield. She heard Robert's voice answering, gaily at first, then angrily. Then, as the bugle on both sides sounded again, they reached the top of the hill and Tom heaved her gently down.

"There," he said. "Did ye take in what I said of Outsiders?"

"Yes," said Cecilia meekly. "No-one must kill me."

"Well done, my lady," said Tom. "And now don't ye give me more of that about not being no lady. A man's only to look at ye to see ye are. I reckon ye'd hold your own beside Princess Rosalind herself."

Cecilia would have protested at any other time, but now she looked down and saw the battle beginning and could think of nothing else. Towerwood had a great army, a huge black block of men and horses, spread out in the snow against the rising sun. Cecilia saw the red gleam of armour and the long banners streaming above them. The outlaws were a quarter the number and nothing like so well armed. Nor did they have a banner among them. They were clustered at the mouth of the valley, with two

groups of cavalry up on the low hills to right and left. Cecilia was horrified at how few of them there were.

"They will all be massacred!" she exclaimed to Tom.

"Could be," he answered soberly. Cecilia could hardly bear it, when he said it. She thought of how happy they had all seemed five minutes ago, and she burst into tears.

Through her tears, she saw the vague galloping mass of Towerwood's cavalry charging at the outlaws. She saw them met by black whirring arrows which threw some into confusion. Most of them galloped on, though, and found the outlaws' levelled spears. Then a second wave set out from the enemy's army, and another. As they came, first one wing of the outlaw-riders, then the other, raced down from the hills to help. The mouth of the valley became an ugly heaving mass of men and horses. Among them was the flash, flash of lifted swords. Shouts, screams and war-cries came horribly up.

Outlaw horses galloped back up the hills on either side. Lord Strass's horses rallied round into an orderly group, but the side where James of March had gone was all confusion, with enemy cavalry mixed up among the outlaws and always that flash, flash of swords. Cecilia saw a horse rear and its rider fall. She was sure it was James. Rupert Lord Strass rode out in front of his men, with his sword raised, and then charged down again into the fighting. His riders followed and were swallowed up.

Beyond the valley, nearly half Towerwood's army was still waiting, but as Lord Strass disappeared, Cecilia saw them begin to move. The whole black mass, riders and foot soldiers, came slowly down on the struggling outlaws.

"Oh!" cried Cecilia, and looked hopelessly around for help. She looked behind her, and could have fainted with horror. The hill sloped smoothly down, behind the steep face where the caves were, and below Cecilia, at the bottom of the slope, was another army. It was at least as large as the outlaws' entire force. Over its twinkling horse and glinting foot flew a long yellow banner with a bear in its midst. Cecilia tugged Tom round and despairingly pointed. "Look!"

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Tremath," he said. "Come to make an end on it right enough. Then this is in the Prince's name."

"But I don't think the Prince is here, do you?"

"No," said Tom. "He bain't. I been looking. He's not here, for sure."

"Well—" Cecilia began, but Tom interrupted.

"My lady, ye stay here. Ye keep hid behind this rock here, see. I must warn 'em. Maybe they spare some men to hold off Tremath. Any way, I best warn 'em."

"Very well," said Cecilia. "Hurry."

Tom set off down the steep path again, and as he left Cecilia, the second half of Towerwood's army reached the fighting. They came with a roar and a shriek of trumpets, and in a matter of seconds the outlaws were broken into bands. The valley below was filled with desperate seething battle. Cecilia, rather than watch, turned to look at Tremath.

The new army was coming up the hill towards her. The rider in front under the streaming yellow banner was barely twenty yards away. Cecilia stood on the edge of the cliff with the battle heaving behind her, biting her muff and full in view. She had been so busy watching that she had utterly forgotten to hide. Now it was too late. She could see soldiers pointing at her. She felt them all looking at her, and the force of all those staring eyes was so overpowering that it seemed to be driving her backwards over the edge of the cliff. She bent her head against those faces, as she might against a wind, and stumbled towards them for fear of going back.

Commands rang out along the new army. Cecilia looked up to find it had stopped, all except the rider in front, his squire, and the man who carried the banner. They came on. She heard their horses in the crisp snow, but she could not look up again until the rider spoke.

"Are you one of the Outsiders who claims the coronet? Answer me, girl. I am Humphrey Lord Tremath."

It was a haughty, angry voice, but when Cecilia looked up, she was pleasantly surprised at the man. He looked agreeably intelligent, and his eyes were grey and honest. It was not the kind of face which would willingly join with Conrad of Towerwood, Cecilia was sure.

"I am an Outsider," she answered, "but I have no claim whatsoever to the coronet. Neither has my brother. There has been a mistake about that, I assure you—er—my lord."

"How so? I have been told—"

Cecilia, encouraged by his face, if not his voice, had a sudden idea that she might be of some help to Robert. She ran up to the horse and took hold of Lord Tremath's armed foot. He looked down at her in amazement. "I think you have been told a great many untruths, Lord Tremath. Tell me, did the Count of Gairne say the Prince was fighting Lord Howeforce here?"

"He did. What of it?"

"It is not true. The Prince is not here, I assure you. Please believe me. The Prince has disappeared and so has my brother. It seems certain that someone has them prisoner—unless you have news of them that I have not." Cecilia held her breath until Lord Tremath answered. It could so easily be that what she said was quite wrong. After all, she knew so very little really.

Lord Tremath frowned at her. "Are you sure? He was to be leading the troops—the Prince, I mean. I know nothing of your brother."

"But he is not," said Cecilia. "It is the Count of Gairne." She looked back at the valley, to make sure that what she said was still true, but the hill hid most of it from view where she now stood.

"Walk with us, my lady," said Lord Tremath. "We will see." He and the two men with him rode slowly to the edge of the cliff. Cecilia went nervously with them, nervous because she was suddenly "my lady" to this man too—it made her afraid that he was planning to keep her in a dungeon—and even more nervous of their horses. They were magnificent heavy war-horses. They had heard the sound of the battle and were jigging and curvetting with excitement. The squire, Cecilia knew, must be a magnificent horseman to keep his horse in check at all, and she was afraid she would be trampled on despite his skill.

She and the riders looked down at the valley. They had come at a rare moment of order. The outlaws were all grouped back against the cliff, archers kneeling, spearmen standing and cavalry wheeling into place on the wings. Robert was riding in front of them all, calling commands. Towerwood's army had drawn off slightly and filled the open end of the valley. Cecilia recognized Towerwood himself moving among the cavalry, arranging the next onslaught, waving an arm to call up fresh archers from the rear.

"Yes," said Lord Tremath, "I see Towerwood there, and Darron, and March, and Moyne. There is no sign of the Prince, nor are there more than a few of his men, but they could be in reserve, behind that rise."

Cecilia was not listening to him, nor was she thinking of their trampling horses any more. She was in tears because it was so plain that the outlaws were penned in against the cliff. The only possible way they could escape was up the way Tom had brought her, or up one or two other paths on the cliff. The paths were like little glaciers of frozen snow, and if any men could manage to climb them, there was Lord Tremath at the top.

"Why did they all laugh so?" she thought. "Because they knew there was no hope?"

Cecilia only remembered where she was, when she heard the squire say: "No, the Prince is not there. You spoke truly, my lady."

"Then," said Lord Tremath, "this is not our quarrel. Indeed, Towerwood scarcely needs our help as it is."

He was right. Towerwood's army was moving in again to smash the remaining outlaws against the cliff-face.

"But," Cecilia cried out, "if you stay here you will be cutting them off in the rear."

"That was our intention, my lady," answered Lord Tremath. "Come." He and the squire and the standard-bearer turned their eager horses and rode away, not very far, only a few yards from the cliff-edge. Lord Tremath beckoned to Cecilia. "You must stay with us, my lady," he said.

Cecilia did not want to leave the cliff-edge. She made up her mind to stay. Then Towerwood's army threw itself on the outlaws, and it was like the sea breaking on a reef in a froth of swords and spears and rearing horses. Cecilia turned and ran towards Lord Tremath.

Almost as soon as she reached him, there was a clatter of hooves at the cliff face, and a foaming blue roan horse hurled itself scrambling onto the slope. There, Robert, on its back, reined in so hard that man and beast nearly toppled back over the cliff-edge. After him came Rupert Lord Strass with James of March lying hanging over his saddle-bow. He too reined in as he saw Lord Tremath. Then to Cecilia's astonishment, outlaws in Hornet livery appeared all along the cliff-edge, riding and on foot. Most of them were laughing as they appeared, but the sight of Lord Tremath stopped them where they stood. And from the waiting Tremath troops came a long burring of voices as the soldiers there realised that Towerwood and his allies were down in the valley fighting one another.

PART III
Riders by Day

Chapter 1 – Courcys

Alex and Cecilia were missed at Arnforth Hall fairly early on, but the Courcys were the kind of family which only became united for action at the latest possible moment. Nothing was done for hours.

Susannah was the first to see that Alex and Cecilia were not coming. She had been waiting and watching all morning, for, at last, she had made up her mind that she would apologise to Alex. She would lick his boots if necessary. It had dawned on her, in that awful moment when the Wild Rider had suddenly hurled himself into the bay, that her remarks really hurt Alex's feelings. And when Alex and Cecilia did not come back to the farm, she was sure she had hurt them once too much. So, on the pretext of decorating the hall, she hung about near the front door. She saw Old John arrive in the trap and drive round to the servants' entrance. She ran round there as soon as she could, and saw Cecilia's bandbox and Alex's bag. Old John had gone by the time she realised that Alex and Cecilia were not there too.

She waited another hour. The bell rang for the hasty muddled lunch they always had the day of a party. Alex and Cecilia always came to this lunch. Susannah ran into the ballroom, all dirty pinafore and wild hair. Harry was there with Egbert, both on the same step-ladder, trying to hang up a green paper dragon.

"Harry, Egbert, did you know Cecilia and Alex had not come yet?"

Harry, whose conscience was troubling him about the Hornbys even more than Susannah's, nearly fell off the step-ladder. He saved himself by using Egbert, and Egbert, who had a soft spot for Cecilia, was not balanced either. Between them, they tore down the paper dragon.

"Go away, Susannah!" Harry said.

"Have it all to do again, now, what?" said Egbert.

Susannah tried her poetic sister Letitia after lunch, but Letitia, much smeared with ink, was composing rhymed mottoes for each of the guests and was not really attending. "Could I rhyme Cecilia with Ophelia, dear?" Lavinia and Emily, who were helping her, thought not. Susannah clapped her hands to her face and ran away to Charlotte.

"Ophelia was drowned!" she told Charlotte, too worried to make her idea plain.

"I know, dear." Charlotte was already busy with her clothes, because, of course, her fiancé Charles Phelps was to be at the party.

By this time, most of the preparations were done. Martin came out of the billiard room where he had been avoiding work. Susannah caught him before he could vanish somewhere else. "Alex and Cecilia are not here yet."

He was the one person who took her seriously. "Really? Standing on their dignity probably. After all, they must have some. Don't worry, though. That old father of theirs will send them along."

"But Mr. Hornby has gone to London for Father."

"So he has." Martin realised that if he went on attending to Susannah, she would be sending him to the farm to look. He began to make off. "Let me know if they do not come in the next hour."

This was a clever move, because Susannah was being dressed when the hour was up. She escaped though, because there was a crisis about Charlotte's hair and Susannah was forgotten. With her own hair in curl-papers and her pretty white dress unhooked, Susannah ran down to the hall and the ballroom, and then to find Martin. Martin had vanished, of course, but she found Harry, already dressed, prowling on a wide landing.

"What is it, Susannah? They still have not come, have they?"

"No," she said. "They have not. Harry, I think it is my fault."

"No," he said. "It's mine. You can set yourself at ease, Susannah. If they are not here in half an hour I shall have to see Father about it."

Susannah could not wait so long. A quarter of an hour later, when she was properly dressed, she went to her mother and tried to explain. Lady Courcy, fond though she was of Susannah, could not make head or tail of it. Nor could she rid herself of a sneaking feeling that none of it was very important. But her poor Susannah seemed so distressed that she agreed to talk to Sir Edmund about it. Anyway, the guests were beginning to arrive and she needed to hurry him up.

Sir Edmund Courcy, who was just like Martin, except that he took his hands out of his pockets to hunt, was of course not nearly dressed. Lady Courcy tried to frighten him into hurrying, as she always did, and it seemed to her that a good way to frighten him was to explain about Susannah.

"And those little Hornbys have not arrived. I cannot think what has happened. My poor Susannah is terribly upset, dear, and has some odd idea that it is her fault they have not come."

"Why?" said Sir Edmund, mislaying the studs his man was following him around with. "They should have been here all day, surely?"

"But they have not been, dear."

"Then why was I not told? My studs, Smith! Oh, there they are at last! Josiah is in London, you know, and I am responsible for those children. We must send to the farm and enquire."

So, to Susannah's relief, a footman was sent to the farm. He went very reluctantly, since, being a footman, he was twenty times more of a snob than the family who paid him, but he went nevertheless. Susannah saw him anxiously to the door before she went off to greet the first of her guests.

Harry, meanwhile, knew nothing of this. Shortly after the footman left, he squared his shoulders, straightened his collar, and went to confess to Sir Edmund. His father stopped him impatiently after the first few sentences.

"What is the matter with you all? I sent James to enquire ten minutes ago. Why on earth should it be your fault? A man listening to you would think the whole family had conspired to keep these children at home."

"Well, we did not exactly conspire, sir, but I am afraid that is what it may have seemed like to them."

"Oh, nonsense," said Sir Edmund. "Fudge!"

The party was in full swing by the time the footman returned. He had the presence of mind to call Sir Edmund away from the guests before he told him the alarming news that Alex and Cecilia had set out early and should have been at Arnforth two hours before luncheon.

"Miss Gatly was quite beside herself, sir, because it came onto snow soon after they left. She fears they are lost, sir."

"With some justice, I imagine," Sir Edmund answered, and hurried to his study to smoke a cigar and think. As soon as the cigar was lit, he remembered what Harry had said and rang for James again. "Fetch all my children here at once. I want Charlotte too, but not Charles Phelps. They are all to come whatever they are doing." And as James went away again, Sir Edmund imagined himself telling Josiah the news and nearly bit his cigar through.

Fathers seldom mentioned business-affairs in those days, so that none of the Courcys knew how grateful they should have been to Josiah. Sir Edmund, being as lazy as Martin, had let his money get into something rather worse than a mess. Josiah had discovered this by accident some time back and had been trying to straighten Sir Edmund out ever since. But the case was next to hopeless and things had reached the stage where it would be entirely due to Josiah's work in London that the Courcys had any money at all by the end of the week. Indeed, the most Sir Edmund hoped for was sufficient money to have Charlotte safely married at the

end of January. After that, he was thinking of emigrating. And now, when he needed Josiah's help so badly, it looked as it his family had somehow lost Josiah's children.

They all came into the study, all except Charlotte, looking frightened and dutiful. Charlotte was sulking at being snatched away from Charles when she was really looking her best, but even she forgot her bad temper when Sir Edmund told them what had happened.

"I shall faint," she announced, but no-one took any notice.

The whole story came out and Sir Edmund was relieved to find it was no worse. Susannah and Harry told their part. Lavinia, Emily and Charlotte admitted to calling Alex an oaf, and Martin agreed that he had been high-handed to reprove Alex on top of all the rest. Egbert, who despaired of seeing Cecilia again, surprised them all by saying:

"Rotten bad show, all of us. Better send out search parties. Never come to Arnforth again after this, what?"

But Sir Edmund had not finished with them. He took another ten minutes to say what he thought, and most of what he said was to Harry. Harry was hard put to it not to cry, and Susannah wept heartily. It made it all the more impressive that Sir Edmund was not, like Josiah, a lecturing, raging father.

Then search-parties were sent and the Christmas party fizzled out. Harry and Susannah were very thankful that it did. They were able to creep away with a candle to the back of the linen-room and talk it all over.

Susannah said: "I think *we* should try to find them. We ought, Harry."

"But we do not know where they have got to. It could be anywhere. Wait and see what the search-parties find."

They went on talking, however, until Susannah remembered how Cecilia had run away across the bay two years before. Harry looked at her with long rippling shudders running from his hair to his heels.

"We had better go and look at the quicksands, Susannah. Let us go before it is light, then we will get there before anyone else thinks of it. It is the least we can do."

Then, very late when the search-parties had come back empty handed, they went to bed and Susannah at least had horrifying dreams of Wild Riders—hundreds of them. Harry never said what he dreamt, but when they met again in the early morning he was as white as a sheet in the light of Susannah's candle. His first act was to go to the gun-room and borrow one of Sir Edmund's heavy ornate pistols. He made sure it was loaded too. Then he saddled his horse and helped Susannah with her pony and they set off, eating bread and cheese as they went.

They reached the bay as the sun came up behind the Hornbys' hill. The tide was just going out and wind swept bitterly in from the mouth of the estuary. Harry was relieved to see the black sands and salty grey snow appearing as they looked. Both he and Susannah had clean forgotten the sea.

"We can get to the quicksands now if we go carefully," he said. Susannah followed him down the slippery rocks, realising how foolish they were to expect to find anything. If the sea had been up all night, then anything outside the quicksands would have been swept out to sea with the tide. Harry set a diagonal course across the bay on the island-side of the river-channel, so that they would always have the water between them and danger.

It was only by the most extraordinary lucky accident that they found anything. They were, without knowing it, almost beside the hidden road from the island and Harry was trying to bring himself to cross the river-channel, when he saw something moving, almost hidden against the grey gleaming sand.

"Susannah! There are two horses in the quicksands."

Susannah's hands at once went almost over her eyes in horror, but she could not bear not to look. She was sure whose horses they must be. They were one behind the other, moving slowly and steadily through the quicksands. The horse in front was a beautiful ghostly grey. As the sun caught his bridle, it glinted gold. The horse behind was brown, and if ever a horse looked bewildered and tired it was that horse.

"That one behind," said Harry. "That is Alex's Trim Jim. I'd know him anywhere. I do not know the other, though, do you?" He watched them, expecting them to sink and struggle any minute, but they did not.

"It is the Wild Rider's horse!" Susannah whispered.

"Nonsense! That one was a blue roan. As if anyone could forget that."

By now, the animals were nearly at the river-channel. Everard's horse—for that was what he was—was going slowly across. Trim Jim was close behind him, going faster now, because at last the landscape was familiar and he began to believe he would see his own stable again after all. Harry rode quickly across to them. The grey shied aside when he came up, but Harry managed to catch hold of its bridle. He was amazed at the antique look of the harness and at the gold leopards stamped upon it.

Susannah came up behind, calling to Trim Jim and pulling sugar out of her pocket. "What can have happened?" she said to Harry. "Why is this strange horse—? And what of Cecilia's Nancy?" Cecilia's little mare was still in Falleyfell, of course, being excellently cared for by the Prince's grooms.

Harry and she as they held out the sugar both happened to glance along the way the horses had come. Both or them gasped: "There's a *road there!*" They forgot the horses. The beasts nuzzled the sugar from their hands and then, seeing they were not noticed any longer, continued calmly along the hardway towards the island.

"Falleyfell," said Susannah.

"Oh!" said Harry. "It's impossible! It cannot be! But the Wild Rider went this way, I am sure of that. I think Alex and Cecilia must have tried to follow him. We had better take this road and—and ask anyone we meet."

"They—they will not have shadows," said Susannah, terrified.

"The strange horse has," Harry answered. They looked after the animals, who were again almost camouflaged in the glinting sands. Indeed, all they could clearly see of them were their long black shadows. "Come on, Susannah," said Harry. He made sure to cock his pistol, and then set off down the hardway, the way the horses had come. And Susannah bravely followed.

Chapter 2 – Tracks

When they reached the other side of the bay, Harry and Susannah found the fresh tracks of the two horses in the frozen snow of the steep bank. Further on, there was a trampled patch among the bushes where the two beasts had waited most of the night for the tide to go out. Then the tracks led inland from the trampled patch to the road. They were almost the only prints upon it. Since it had been freezing hard all night, the marks were still deep and clear.

"We must follow these," said Harry. "This is the way to find Alex at least."

Susannah nodded and stared round the new countryside. In the snow, it was hard to see whether it was a strange land or simply the moors they knew were on the other side of the bay. They were not sure that they were indeed somewhere they did not know, until they came to where the road branched down to the stone village. There, the horses' prints were concealed in a multitude of hoof-marks, where a herd of cows had been driven to the village.

"There are *not* any villages here," said Susannah.

"Well, here is one now," said Harry, and rode down towards it. He was not shy of making enquiries when it might be a matter of life and death. His only real worry was that they might not speak English in this country. From anything else, he hoped his father's pistol might protect them.

Susannah was very shy. She stayed outside the gate, while Harry went to knock at the door of the first cottage. The man who opened the door, to her relief, looked foreign, but not so very strange. He wore a smock-frock like men did on the home farm.

"Excuse me," said Harry politely. "I am looking for two friends of mine. Have you seen any strangers here?"

"Outsiders, ye mean?" asked the man—in English, to Harry's relief, but with a stronger, slower accent than that of the countrymen near Arnforth. Harry nodded, hopefully. The man stared him all over and then went onto Susannah, before he spoke again. "Aye, there be news of Outsiders," he said, "but not hereabouts. We hear tell of an Outsider who laid claim to the coronet, so they lock him up for treason."

"Alex!" Harry said in amazement.

"That be the name," said the man. He was interested and conversational.

Before Harry could find out more, he had to tell the man his own name and Susannah's.

"Courcy?" said the man. "That be a name known here. Ye be cousins of the Prince, to have that name."

"No—no," said Harry, hastily, suddenly afraid that he would be locked up for treason too. "No relation at all, I assure you. What made them think Alex was? He's only—" Then he stopped, because of what Sir Edmund had said last night.

"A peasant's son?" the man asked, not seeming worried about it. Harry blushed. "That were what the Prince call him, they say, when the Outsider say the island belong to him."

"But—" said Harry and stopped again. He realised that if he told the man that Alex was right, and the further fact that the island had belonged to the Courcys before that, he would almost certainly be locked up before he had a chance to rescue Alex. "Where is Alex? Where have they locked him up?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Some say here, some say there. Some say the Prince run mad, poor boy, at finding an usurper come to crown his sorrow, and tried to kill the Outsider. Certain 'tis the Prince is mad and close confined for a space. Wicked times we live in."

Harry's hair was standing on end by this time. "And Cecilia? Have you heard of Cecilia?"

The man shook his head. "I reckon you should ask at Falleyfell for news, my lord."

"I'm not a lord. And isn't this Falleyfell then?"

The man looked shocked, and, Harry thought, a little suspicious. "No, indeed. This here be Arnforth."

At this, Harry was so astonished that all he could do was to make a strange squeak. He thought the man was looking at him more peculiarly than before. He noticed that he was beginning to shut his door. "Then where is Falleyfell?" he demanded.

The man had got his front door half shut by now. He had decided that Harry was mad. Nothing else could explain his strange distraught manner. And it seemed to him that all Outsiders were probably mad. They got it young and it took them in one of two ways: either they were like this Alex people talked of and had delusions of grandeur; or else they were like this one, who was every inch a nobleman and yet so strongly denied it. He pointed out the way to Falleyfell and then slammed the door in Harry's face.

Harry, imagining he had probably gone to call his friends to arrest him as a traitor, got back to his horse and Susannah as fast as he could. "Hurry," he said. "He did not trust me an inch. We must get to Falleyfell. He says it is along the main road."

Susannah was giggling. "He thought you were mad, Harry. I could see him thinking it. This place *cannot* be called Arnforth. It is too ridiculous!"

Harry laughed at that too. It was ridiculous that there should be two places of the same name only ten miles or so apart, but he saw there would scarcely be a chance of them getting mixed up. All the same, he was very worried. Susannah might have been right about what the man thought, but it made no difference to their position. One was locked up here for being mad—witness this Prince—just as much as for being a traitor, like Alex. And it alarmed him that there was no news of Cecilia. At least they knew Alex was alive. He wished he had sent Susannah home and come here by himself.

"Oh!" said Susannah. "Those horses came down to the road here. Look!"

They were some way beyond the turning to the village now. Harry looked to the left, as Susannah pointed, where a long slope rose from the roadside, and saw the tracks they had been following again. They led straight up the hill into the sun. He wondered if it was worth following them any more after what he had been told. Susannah had no doubt that it was. She was already leaving the road and her fat pony was blowing out steam as he scrambled up the hill. Harry shrugged his shoulders and went after her.

"One thing," Susannah called over her shoulder, "that man in the village had a shadow. I feel better about it now."

Harry did not. To have met real people hidden away here seemed much more frightening to him. Real people did real things. But he kept

on after his sister, up the hill, over its smooth shoulder, and down to another road, much less used than the one they had left. The horses had gone straight across, coming from further hills on the other side. Harry and Susannah were just crossing the road too, when a black mare came trotting round a bend. Its rider was a woman in a great hooded cloak and she reined in when she saw them.

"Stop!" she called. "What have you done with Everard?"

They stared at her beautiful sad face in astonishment. Susannah, in spite of her surprise, sighed with envy of the lady's bright fair hair. Like many dark-haired little girls, Susannah craved to have golden hair and a pink-and-white face.

The lady looked surprised too. "I am sorry. I thought you were the other Outsiders. Where are they?"

"We do not know, madam," said Susannah. "We are looking for them."

"Oh, find them—find the boy at least," implored the lady. "My son is with him. That much I have been told."

"We are going to find Alex," Susannah told her grandly, "or die in the attempt."

"Pray God you succeed," said the lady. "This realm is in deadly danger while Towerwood has him. And you must find the young lady too. Towerwood is hell for leather after her and Robert, if my messenger is to be trusted."

"Who is Towerwood?" Harry asked.

"Who is Robert?" Susannah asked.

They did not believe the lady heard them. She talked on, leaning earnestly towards them, with tears running down her face. She talked frantically, as if no-one had given her a chance to talk before. Harry and Susannah were awed and appalled, because they had never been beside so much grief before, and their awe was greater because they understood hardly any of what the lady said. She was, Susannah thought, the kind of person who always took it for granted you knew the people she was talking about, and now, in her distress, she mentioned names, places, and happenings all crowded together in a way which quite bewildered the two children.

"And I was not at Endwait, or I might have seen his face and known the truth. Now, surely, it will die with him. Poor Everard is too young to understand, you see—but I know he is not mad. I do not believe he killed Arbard, though as for the other, I am not sure. It is all Towerwood's doing. He has him somewhere, no doubt intending to make him mad indeed. And he knows I know, because Phillippa was standing by when I told Robert to proclaim himself Prince. Towerwood dropped many hints

of this last night when he came to Falleyfell and my poor sister-in-law took poison rather than marry him. She is dead, God rest her soul, and I deserve to die too for my deceptions—for I told Towerwood I would marry him so that he could be the Prince, and then when he was gone I ran away rather than take poison too. If you find Everard, tell him I have gone to the nuns of Uldrim. I shall be safe there for a while."

The lady stopped speaking suddenly, with her blue eyes wide, wide open. They saw she was horrified that she had said so much to two complete strangers. "Tell no-one of this!" she said wildly. "Tell only Everard where I am."

"We promise not to tell a soul, ma'am," Harry said.

"Not a word," promised Susannah. They were both thinking that the lady could not have told anyone more likely to keep their promise, since they understood so little of what she said.

"Nor say that you have seen me," said the lady. They promised again.

"How can we say," Susannah thought, "when we do not know who she is?"

"Thank you, a thousand times," said the lady. "I would reward you richly if I could." Then Princess Rosalind, only they did not know her name, rode quickly away down the road. The Courcys set off up the hill after the hoof-marks again.

Harry inspected his pistol at the top of the hill. "I understood one thing from all that rigmarole," he said, "and that is that if we meet a man called Towerwood, the best thing I can do is to take careful aim and shoot him between the eyes."

"Poor lady!" said Susannah, still very awed.

Then for a long time neither of them said anything. They followed the prints across bare snowy uplands for miles. The wind made their eyes water but even so they could see there was not even a shepherd moving. Harry was thinking that this strange country must be very under-populated, when they came to the place where Towerwood had captured Alex and Everard. Susannah cried out, it was so gruesome.

There was the deeply churned snow leading from Falleyfell. It ended in a wide trampled circle and in the middle of the circle was a great bright splatter of blood. It had been so cold that the blood was still red and there was no mistaking what it was. If Susannah had been Charlotte, she would have offered to faint on the spot.

"Not Alex!" she said.

Harry was as white as a sheet again and wanted to be sick, but he rode over to the place. "Two people have said Alex is alive," he said, and his voice came out hoarse and squeaky by turns. He had never admired Susannah more than when she came up beside him to look too.

"But," she said, "whoever it was did not die—or not straight away. He went after all those horses. Look."

Harry looked to where the churned snow led away again, where Towerwood had carried the boys off to Endwait. Drips of blood lay among the hoof-marks, and there were dragging footsteps. He took a long, large breath. They would have to go that way too, and goodness only knew what they would come upon.

"He must be horribly wounded," said Susannah. "We ought to find him, whoever he is. Do come on, Harry." And Harry thought, as he went on along the line of bloodstains, that his sister was probably the bravest member of the Courcy family.

The trail led into a slight dip. To one side of it was a tiny stone hut, a shepherd's mountain shelter probably. It had a broken chimney, with a wisp of smoke coming from it. The bloodstains led to it, though, of course, the hoof-marks went on. Someone had dragged the wounded man through the door of the hut. They could see by the long trailing mark.

Harry and Susannah looked at one another, and then Harry rode over to the hut and knocked on the door.

"Who be there?" shouted a gruff voice.

"My name is Henry Courcy," Harry answered, because there seemed no other answer he could make.

The door opened at once. Harry did not know it, but his name was little short of magic in the Principality. Eleanor de Courcy, besides being famously won by Prince Geoffrey, had been a Princess whose praises were still sung, though she had lived five hundred years before. The shepherd who opened the door nodded and smiled. He had expected his visitor to look like an Outsider, and he did.

"What can a poor man do for ye, my lord?"

"Who is the wounded man you have, please? Can you tell us how he came to be hurt?"

"Aye, my lord. It be poor young Lord Arbard. He can tell ye hisself how he come to have his blood spilled, if ye care to step inside."

Harry, very relieved that he did not have to look upon a corpse, dismounted and went into the hut. Susannah dragged both horses over to the door so that she could see what was going on. Lord Arbard was lying on a pile of sheepskins, very pale and breathing heavily, but, as far as Harry could see, nothing like dead. He had been drinking soup from a wooden bowl.

"A likeness, a definite likeness," he said breathlessly to Harry. "There is a touch of the Prince about you—not Everard, but William, you know, Prince Everard's father. What can I tell you?"

"Where Alex Hornby is, if you know."

Lord Arbard told them what he knew, which, of course, was very little, but enough to make Harry more determined than ever to shoot Towerwood if he got a chance. Susannah, listening, took a violent dislike to Prince Everard. She was glad to hear that Alex had blacked his eye and she admired Alex, if possible, more than ever for it.

"Towerwood imagined, thought, knew that he had killed your humble servant," said Lord Arbard. "He would have killed any other man, but I have a curious, unusual, strange—in short my heart is in my right side."

"Congratulations," said Harry. "I wish mine was." He wondered if that was what made Lord Arbard use three words where one would do.

"But you must hurry," Lord Arbard said. "You must trace, follow—"

"Yes," said Harry hastily. "We must. I hope you get well soon." He backed out of the hut and mounted his horse again. The shepherd came out with offers of soup, but Harry refused. Once he got into a real conversation with Lord Arbard he feared it would last all day, and as far as he could see, they could not afford all day. "We had better hurry," he said to Susannah. "It was yesterday afternoon that all this happened."

So they rode on again. Susannah said indignantly: "What a country this is, where someone can carry off the Prince and nobody else does a thing about it!"

"I think it is because their ruler has just died," Harry answered. "Everything is at sixes and sevens, and there is only us to help."

"Only us and our pistol," said Susannah. "God for Harry, England and St. George!" She went careering off down a hill waving one arm over her head. Harry followed, laughing, but wishing she could take matters more seriously.

After that they met nothing and nobody for the rest of the morning. The tracks were plain and clear in the crisp snow until they led them down to the Endwait road. There, they vanished in a host of other hoofmarks.

"Like a stag taking to water," said Susannah. "The villain did it on purpose."

Harry got off his horse and inspected the tracks carefully. It was difficult to see, but he thought the riders must have turned right as they came to the road. One horse might have swung out a little, into less trampled snow, as it turned on the inside of the troop. He was still bending, inspecting the place, trying to decide if it looked like a horse marking time while the others made a wide turn, when he heard the squeaking of wheels. There was a donkey-cart coming along the road, loaded with sacks of vegetables, and on top of the sacks was the body of a man dressed in orange. This one was definitely dead. Susannah turned away. The driver

of the cart, a very gloomy man in a blue smock, looked at them with his eyebrows raised.

"I warn ye," he said, "they'll be on ye if ye waste time searching around here. The battle is lost for all the Perland caves and Howeforce is put to flight. I thought they said ye were locked up for treason, the pair on ye,"

"Oh, no," said Susannah faintly. "It was not us, sir, but thank you for warning us, all the same. Come on, Harry, please."

The driver pointed down the road, the opposite way to the one which Harry thought the horses had taken. "Go ahead of me there," he said. "But ye must not go to Gairne. If ye can get to Arbard ye'll be safe."

"No," said Harry. "They went the other way, Susannah. We shall have to go that way, whether or not there has been a battle." Then he said politely to the driver, "Do you mind telling me who has won the battle? I do not know Howeforce."

The driver suddenly became surly and gave a frightened look over one shoulder at the dead man on his cart. "Then ye'll be glad to hear Towerwood has won, seeing ye're on his side."

"That man *again!*" said Susannah. "We are not on his side, sir."

"Then get to Arbard," the driver answered, still very suspicious. He would not speak to them again. They watched him click his tongue to his donkey and go slowly wheeling away along the road.

"Oh, dear!" said Susannah.

"It cannot be helped," Harry said. "I am sure they went this way. Bear up, Susannah. Remember some of this is our fault."

They came to the Endwait turning half a mile further on. The road was deserted. They saw that tracks led across the bridge and into the gorge, but there was no means of knowing if they were the right ones. Other people had ridden in and out of Endwait since, and confused the whole thing.

"What shall we do?" Harry said. "I think we must go into the valley and ask. People seem friendly if we say we are not on Towerwood's side."

Susannah agreed. The two of them were just crossing the bridge, when there were shouts from the hill on the other side of the road. Before they realised what was happening a man in mail thundered up to them and reined his great horse almost onto its haunches beside them. He was all in red and white and shining armour.

"He looks like St. George," Susannah thought. She thought he had a nice, rather nervous face. "He has taken us for the Hornbys—like the lady!" She was right.

"I beg your pardon," said the man. "I took you for the other Outsiders. But now I see that you are both too dark, and that the lady is a great deal younger. I am Howard Lord Darron. May I ask your names?"

Susannah happily told him who they were. He bowed like a real knight-errant, and Susannah was so delighted with him that she added, hoping to make him properly their friend: "We are not on Towerwood's side, either."

"That is very regrettable," said Lord Darron, "for it would seem that I am. I must ask you to accompany me and for the time being to regard yourselves as under arrest."

Chapter 3 – Castles-in-the-Air

Alex was woken by Everard exclaiming. He rolled over to find that the Prince had crawled out of the straw, leaving a cold prickly space. Alex began to shiver before he was properly awake. The dungeon was full of mist from the half-frozen moat outside and cut in two by a bright line of sunlight from the grating. Everard was in the sunlight and the mist, like an angel in a church window, looking up at the grating.

"Come here and look," he said.

Alex crawled out of the straw and went over to him. The first thing he noticed was a long cascade of icicles hanging between the bars, which made him shiver more. Then he realised that what had made Everard exclaim were the bars of the grating themselves. They were new. They could not have been more than a week old. The iron was still dull grey and where there was rust it was in red-brown trickles.

Under the clustered ice Alex could see the fresh chisel-marks, where the old bars had been hacked away to make room for the new.

"Seven days old," said Everard. "Not more."

"Newer than that, surely," said Alex. "Think how damp it is in here. They might rust like that in a day, or even overnight."

"Yesterday," said Everard, "I would have said you were condemned out of your own mouth and that Towerwood gave orders for these bars after talking to you on the road to Falleyfell. Today I am not so sure. Tell me truthfully, Alex. Are you in league with Towerwood?"

"No," said Alex. "Of course I am not. I hate him as much as you do. The first time I saw his face I hated him more than anyone I had ever met." He looked drearily up at the grating and saw another day of arguing and fighting ahead. They would probably go on like this until they were too weak with hunger to argue any more. Not that he blamed Everard for his suspicions. Anyone in his shoes must feel that they would never trust anyone again. "Oh!" he said. "Let us not spend the rest of our lives quarrelling—er—Your Highness. It is not worth it."

"I agree," Everard answered. "It is not worth it. I had made up my mind that I would not, once I had asked you that. And, in fact, I think

the order for these bars was given before Towerwood set eyes on you. It is a good day's work to fix them in solid stone. He had planned to confine me here, I am sure, before ever you arrived. Your presence is a refinement, but I wished to know if you had consented to it or not."

"I never did," Alex said. He was so relieved at Everard's peace-making that he let his jaw loose and his teeth began to chatter.

"Come back to the straw," said Everard. "There is some chance that we will die of cold before ever we starve."

They sat face to face in the straw, both shivering. Alex saw that the Prince's black eye was going away. It was only pale yellow now. Yesterday must have been its last most colourful day. He told Everard so. Everard laughed.

"An eye for an eye," he said. "Except yours is a bump the size of a pigeon's egg on your forehead."

Alex felt his forehead indignantly and had to admit that Everard had got his own back. "I am sure," he told Everard, "that this is what would please Towerwood—to come back at the end of the week to find us both with two fresh black eyes. We should call it off and spite him."

Everard nodded and held up one hand with two fingers crossed. "Barley," he said.

Alex was pleased to find they had this custom in common. "Barley," he said. "I am glad you know that too."

"As well as Humpty-Dumpty. But I had rather be called Everard." Everard smiled and held out his hand. They shook hands and then Everard asked: "By the way, what did you mean by Habeas Corpus? Is it some kind of legal term?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," said Alex. "From Magna Carta—but I suppose you will not have heard of that either." He explained about it, as far as he could, and about the barons and King John. "So now," he said, "even the most obvious criminal is given a trial. No-one can be locked up simply on suspicion or because someone wants them out of the way."

"Like you and me?" said Everard. "I see that the Outsiders have a point there. Alex, I promise you that if we ever get free from here I shall institute Habeas Corpus in this Principality. I come to see that there is a crying need for it." Alex laughed. "I am not joking," Everard said haughtily. Then he laughed too, but not very happily. "What a castle in the air!"

As if to point out to Everard how hopeless it was to discuss Habeas Corpus, someone rattled the bolts and chains on the door. The two of them sat where they were and watched their jailer slide a hatch aside at the bottom of the door and push another cup and plate through onto the doorstep inside the dungeon. Alex longed for his knife as he watched. One could have stabbed the jailer through the hatchway and there was

room for a boy to wriggle through the opening. As the hatch slammed shut, he shrugged his shoulders and got up to go for the food. Everard had stood up first, though, and it was he who collected their breakfast and brought it to the jailbird's nest with a very gloomy face.

"Last night was generous compared to this," he said. "Alex, I do not want to make another argument, but I feel you should eat it."

"No," said Alex. "We share as long as we possibly can."

"That will not be long," Everard answered. "Look." There was rather less than half a slice of dry brown bread and the water in the cup scarcely covered the bottom.

"We can suck those icicles for water," Alex said, and firmly broke the bread into two. He was very hungry by now, and the thought of losing this bread in another fight was almost unbearable. Everard, to his relief, took his half without saying any more. They lay in the straw beside the plate eating the bread crumb by crumb to make it last. Alex foresaw a time when they would quarrel about crumbs, but he hoped it was still a long way off.

Everard was picking up crumbs with the end of one finger and licking them first before he ate them. "Castles in the air are very comforting," he said. "I shall build some more, if you will help by telling me that they are unreal. I rely on you for that, Alex. This crumb is a partridge. I shall have that when we are free. And this crumb is bigger. It is a boar's head—no, a whole side of venison. We will have that too."

Alex did not think Everard was being wise. It seemed to him the way to drive oneself mad. He said so.

"Thank you," said Everard. "Say that every five minutes. Oh, Alex, I thought last night I would be mad by the morning. Everything seemed a castle in the air. I was going to be a good Prince, as good as my father, if not better. I was going to be able to live on the island—we say here that it is the mark of a truly good Prince if he can be on the island and the Principality Over the Water is still safely at peace. Now see what I have come to, caught up in my own wise edicts, and all my dreams are down to taking Endwait from Towerwood again so that I can have this wretched dungeon filled in."

Alex changed his mind about Everard's castles in the air. Perhaps reality was worse. "Yes, by all means fill in this dungeon. But I hope you will do something more to Towerwood than take Endwait away from him. These crumbs have made me thirsty." He got up and tried jumping for the icicles at the grating. It was no good. He was not tall enough to reach.

Everard came and jumped for icicles too. He managed to break them off one each and they sucked them. They tasted vile, of dust and rust and pond-weed. Everard shuddered. "These will give us some disease, I imagine. Yes, I will do worse to Towerwood, never fear, but he must be prop-

erly arraigned for High Treason. It will not do to be spiteful. And yet, now I think about it, this is what everyone has said of Towerwood. 'Let us not be spiteful.' So we have been too fair and kind and he has thrived out of all proportion."

"So you did know he was nasty?" Alex said. "I have been wondering why he came to be so powerful, when no-one can look at him without thinking—Here is a brutal monster out for what he can make."

"What could we do?" asked Everard. "He has never done wrong before, for all his faults."

"Really? To look at him you would say he has done nothing else all his life. Surely, Everard, there must have been something. For instance, how did he come to be Count of Gairne? Did he have any claim to be that?"

Everard put his head down and his hands in his hair and nodded. Alex could see that his question had brought up the Prince's saddest thoughts, and he could have kicked himself for asking it. "Yes," said Everard. "He has every claim. He had the lands and title in compensation for the death of his son."

"I am sorry. I did not realise he had a son. How did this son die?"

Alex hoped that Towerwood's son would have nothing to do with Everard's sadness, but when Everard answered, he could have kicked himself again. "His son was my father's squire. They were both killed together in the garden here." Everard looked angrily up at Alex with tears in his eyes and Alex would have done anything to stop the line of talk, but Everard said: "I know you have met Robert. I know that you like him. I was very fond of him and he is my cousin. But I came into the garden as Robert was coming out and Robert was carrying the squire's dagger all covered in blood. Not only was my father his Prince and his uncle, but Bertram of Towerwood was Robert's foster-brother. It could not be worse, Alex. And I suppose Robert thought, since I was not of age, that he was likely to be the next Prince. Towerwood was right to insist I—" Everard stopped suddenly. Alex guessed he was crying. He was very glad not to hear any more for the moment. It was all too horrible. He wanted not to think about the way they had entertained a strange weary outlaw who had confessed to murdering one uncle and not to the other. He was angry not to have known of this. Robert had seemed noble and sad, when they had got over his strangeness—and he had been extremely kind to Alex when he saw how frightened he was. But then he would if he had needed a night's lodging. Then suddenly, Alex had a complete change of feeling. Robert had been nice. Towerwood was nasty and he had been even more horrible to

Everard than to Alex. It seemed to Alex that if one worked backwards from that, then there was a chance that Towerwood had been the villain of the piece all along.

"Look here—" he said.

"Do you know—" Everard said at the same moment.

"Go on," said Alex.

"I was going to say that Towerwood had insisted that all the nobles took the oath of loyalty to me. They were most of them at Endwait, you see, with my father. But then I realised that there had been no question of anyone's loyalty. Robert never claimed the coronet then or later. He had his heralds proclaim his innocence all over the realm, but he never said he was Prince, although I am sure the people would have accepted him if he had. It is Towerwood who is to marry my mother and claim the coronet."

"So it looks as if—Everard, what kind of person was Towerwood's son?"

"It seems terrible to say it, but he was terrified of his father. When Towerwood was not there he was very likeable, though somewhat of a weak character. My father used to try to keep Bertram apart from Towerwood, because of the way he terrified him. Robert would take Bertram hunting whenever Towerwood was at court. Bertram admired Robert tremendously."

"Did Robert like Bertram?"

"Yes. As I said, they were foster-brothers. They were brought up together in Gairne. Bertram's mother was Robert's nurse. The Towerwoods are a fairly humble family, you see."

"You have not really told me what Robert thought of Bertram. I think that is very important, Everard, because you said Robert was carrying Bertram's dagger."

Everard threw two handfuls of straw in the air in irritation. "But I have—Do you not know what it means, to be someone's foster-brother? Do you not have such ties Outside? It is far closer than if they had been truly brothers. It is held sacred here."

"Then—" said Alex.

"Yes, yes," said Everard. "I am there before you. I saw what a fool I was the moment I realised that Robert had not wished to be Prince. And it was Towerwood who suggested that I outlaw Robert forthwith. If he had been arraigned for High Treason in Council, as he should have been, the whole realm would have seen the truth. But I could not bring myself to have Robert meet a traitor's end—he would have been cut into portions, Alex—or now, I see, Bertram would have been, even though he had killed himself."

Alex began throwing straw about now. "Stop, Everard! I cannot understand yet. You think Towerwood made his son kill your father. Do you think he really relied on the poor lad to kill himself afterwards?"

Everard said: "Towerwood despised Bertram. I am sure he knew that was what he would do. Just as I imagine he hopes I am now going mad in your company. I think he likes using people—as he is using you. And I imagine that if he made sure that Bertram killed my father when Robert was by, he knew that if Bertram did not kill himself, then Robert might well take the blame himself. And I think he might have done."

"No," said Alex, "that does not sound at all likely. You are just letting your ideas run away with you, Everard. I think you are right that the whole thing was Towerwood's doing—it seems as if it *must* be, but he could not have relied on Robert to take the blame. *Did* Robert take the blame? Did you ask him before you outlawed him?"

"I asked him," said Everard, "and he denied it. He offered to give me his oath that he had not killed either of them."

"Well, there you are," said Alex. "Could Towerwood have killed your father himself? As far as I can see he does not object to murdering men with his own hands."

"You mean poor Hugo Arbard? I wish I could think that Towerwood had the opportunity, Alex, but he was with me all the time—purposely, I begin to think. And I cannot see that even he would kill his own son."

"Then could Bertram have killed your father because his father made him, and then Robert killed Bertram? I know he killed his uncle, and I remember he said it was the law."

Everard was pulling his hands through his hair and, as his hands were full of straw, it made him look wild and even mad. The straw was the same colour as his hair, so that he was looking like a white gollywog by this time. "Robert denied killing either of them," he protested. "If I believe him in one case, why not in the other? It was different when he killed Aubrey of Gairne. He was Robert's uncle, not his foster-brother, which—but you Outside do not seem to see the bond there is between foster-brothers, so what can I say? My feeling is that it was Bertram killed my father and afterwards himself. Robert, I think, simply took away the dagger so that Bertram should be spared at least a suicide's fate—which is bad enough, when I come to think of it. They are buried at a crossroads with a stake through their heart."

As Everard said this, he looked at Alex, so pale that his yellow black eye stood out again as it had done the day before. Alex no longer wished he had his clasp-knife. He thanked heaven that it had chanced to find a gap in the grating.

"Everard," he said, "take that straw out of your hair and talk of something else, for goodness' sake. I am very sorry I began the subject."

"I am not sorry you began it," Everard answered, but he began to comb his hair with his fingers. "You have helped me see somewhat of the truth. Perhaps we had better talk of other things. Let us build more castles in the air."

Alex began talking of horses and then about school. Everard tried to attend to him, but it never lasted for long. All that day he was returning to his father's death, or to the things to do with it. If Alex would not let him talk about it directly, he disguised it as a castle in the air.

"Here is a good castle," he would say, rolling over and making a heap of straw to stand for the castle. "I will pass an edict about traitors to make their end less severe. It is enough, surely, that they are dead, without doing as we do and chopping them into pieces. Men do not need a piece of a man fastened to the town-gate or a post on the village green to deter them from—"

"You are making me feel sick," Alex answered.

So Everard would go off on a new tack. "I will pass other edicts, many of them, but they will do no good unless the Prince is bound by them too. If I had stayed in Falleyfell, as I had ordered everyone else, then I would not be here. It was meant to be such a clever edict, Alex, since it was supposed to make people show respect for my father by keeping at home, but it was really meant to let us know who was aiding Robert. People were too clever for us, though. Half Gairne went to Robert's camp at Perland, but they all had urgent business there. It was only I who was caught."

Alex said: "Would you have been caught if you had your own soldiers with you? How did you come to have Towerwood's men? That must have made it easy for him."

Everard blushed. "I was an arrant fool. My men were so astonished when I ordered them to put you in the library, that I was afraid they would not obey when I asked them to break the edict. And I knew that Towerwood's men had a name for secrecy."

"So you asked Towerwood for them?" said Alex. "That was plumb daft, Everard. And what made you have me put in the library? Was it that picture?"

Everard, still blushing, went to rub more straw in his hair and then thought better of it. "I thought it would keep you angry," he admitted. "And I hoped you would find the library more interesting than a dungeon. Surely you did if this dungeon is any guide?"

"Yes, I did. You have some fine things there."

They talked of the library for a little, until Everard thought of another castle in the air. "Endwait," he said. "I must search out some deserving man and give the land to him. Robert does not need it. Towerwood had no claim to it at all. I am sure he only disputed it with Robert to make my father come here to be killed. The walled garden makes a very good place for a killing. I—"

"Does it really belong to Robert?" Alex interrupted. "Because he ought to give it to the deserving person if it does."

"No," said Everard. "It is very obscure, his claim. Endwait shall be forfeit to the sovereign, I here proclaim. Now, here is another castle—"

Alex groaned. This went on for hours, until the sun moved away from the grating and left them in cold twilight. No-one brought any more food. Alex began to realise that what had come that morning was to be their day's ration. He saw that they really would starve on that amount. Last night's food, it seemed, was just an extra, to show them what to expect. At length Alex became so hungry that he helped Everard build castles in the air. It was better than thinking of tomorrow's crust. The two of them passed upwards of a hundred imaginary laws and governed the Principality in the strictest justice. Everard came to his hundred-and-twentieth edict.

"This concerns the trial of anyone accused," he said. "They must be brought to trial as soon as possible—as I should have brought Robert to trial—within the week. I shall appoint a justice—good heavens, Alex! This means I must try you. Did you not claim the coronet the day of my father's funeral?"

"No, I did not," said Alex.

"Yes, you did. And you blacked my eye in support of your claim."

Alex realised they would be fighting again in a minute. He did his best to explain that his island did not seem to be the same as Everard's—and he plainly puzzled Everard exceedingly. Everard shook his head.

"I believe you—partly because I cannot understand you. My castle is not ruined, and if yours is, then they are not the same, but how can this be?"

"I have no idea. I was as puzzled as you were. People round us see your people sometimes and call them ghosts."

"But we are not. How can a ghost starve—and I *am* starving, are not you?"

Alex, in order not to think of starving, was brought to something he knew he should have come to before. "I know you are not ghosts, and I know your island is different and I apologize for fighting you about it. I did not know it was your father's funeral. That makes it all the worse. The truth is I was angry with some other people I know and I took it out on you."

Everard laughed. "You too? I would have been more polite to you if I had not been so angry with Robert. He came to the funeral, you see, wearing the Gairne orange in place of black, and tried to plead his cause. And I was so angry at his lack of respect that I ordered him off and sent Darron and March to take him prisoner. I never dreamt he would cross the bay by daylight. We never do. And once in the open, he easily outrode them. And I was ready to do murder, I was so angry when it was found he had gone. So I am sorry too."

Alex held out his hand to Everard. Everard had just taken it, when the chains on the door began to rattle. This time it was the whole door and not the hatch which was being opened. Everard hung onto Alex's hand with both his.

"And I said you should wait till your dying-day for my apology! Pray God I am no prophet!"

Chapter 4 – Pistol

Luckily, Everard was not a prophet. It was Harry and Susannah on the other side of the door, but it had taken them some time to get there, and some time to get over the shock of their arrest.

"Turn this way," said Lord Darron. "I have business at Endwait which will admit of no delay. We must have some talk over your case later, when my business is done."

Harry wondered if he dared refuse. He had thoughts of presenting his pistol at Lord Darron's steel helmet and demanding their freedom. Lord Darron, however, had taken Susannah's bridle, and Harry was afraid she might be hurt if he became violent. He shrugged his shoulders and thought that this was anyhow one way to see the valley. If they were clever, they might learn something of Alex. He decided that it would be best to seem very meek and harmless. That way, they might avoid being locked up too.

To his alarm, Susannah was looking anything but meek. She was red with anger and mortification and actually crying a little. When Harry made no attempt to use his pistol, she turned and made violent pointings at it. Harry shook his head and, as they came out into the valley, Susannah was crying great shaking sobs of rage.

"My dear young lady," said Lord Darron, blinking down at her, "you must not cry. I assure you I will not harm you."

Susannah was so angry at being misunderstood that her sobs changed almost into screams. She had her whip lifted up to hit this impossible false St. George.

"Susannah!" said Harry.

Lord Darron smiled. Susannah could not bear that nervous smiling face in the middle of all that warlike armour. She slashed at it. Lord Darron took the whip as it came down and gently pulled it away. Susannah, who was a very good horsewoman, nearly fell, simply from anger. Harry wished he could pretend he had nothing to do with her.

"Now, now," said Lord Darron. "You are beside yourself, my dear. Pray pull yourself together and ride faster. I am in a hurry. I have to find the Prince."

"The Prince!" exclaimed Harry as they crackled along past the first houses of the village. "Prince Everard, is that?"

"That is he," said Lord Darron, "and I hope I am not too late."

The lines of bare orchard trees seemed to spin round Harry at this. "I hope so too, sir. We are looking for the Prince as well."

"And I do not think he is on your side," Susannah said. "What are you going to do? I think you are a very wicked—"

"Do be quiet!" Harry snapped. Susannah stopped at once, she was so unused to Harry talking to her so angrily. Harry managed to get his horse out ahead of Lord Darron's and stand across his road—at least, it was a street here, in the middle of Endwait village. People in the houses opened doors and peered from windows at the sight of my Lord Darron stopped in the road with his sword drawn, facing a young Outsider who was threatening him with the strangest of weapons and all unarmed otherwise.

"Put your sword away, sir," said Harry. "If I pull this trigger, you will be dead before you can move. I am not lying. Now, will you please explain what you said just now of the Prince."

"Willingly," said Lord Darron. "I do not require your threats, my lord. I learnt some while back from a dying soldier of Towerwood's—who astonished me, I admit, by confessing to have a bad conscience—that Prince Everard is confined in a dungeon here at Endwait. Now may we ride on? You can see how people are staring."

"Let them," said Harry. "Did this soldier mention Alex Hornby?"

"Yes," said Lord Darron. "He is with the Prince. Most unwise, I would have thought it, if the Prince is mad."

"From what we heard," said Susannah, who was not able to keep out of a conversation for long, "I would say the Prince is no madder than I am." She realised from Lord Darron's face that he was carefully not saying that this might not be very sane. She would have stamped her foot if it had not been in her stirrup.

What Lord Darron actually said was very polite. "I too have had my doubts about the Prince's madness. I am not one of those who ever

feared much for the poor boy's reason, and therefore I am going to see. But when I said I hoped I was not too late, I had in mind the fact that Prince Everard's father was killed here in Endwait, a mere fortnight ago. There seems something more than a coincidence here, does there not?"

"There is more," said Harry. "I think we had better ride on, sir. Will you give me your word not to attempt to lock us up?"

"I cannot do that," said Lord Darron, not defiantly, but with a blink and an apologetic smile, "until I find how things stand. Will you agree to an armed truce, my lord? I promise not to lock you up at least until the Prince is found. Please move from the road. We shall be the talk of the Principality as it is, and I had hoped to be secret."

Harry looked round and saw the open doors and the faces at windows. They embarrassed him. It was as if he and Lord Darron were a puppet show. And, of course, they could all be thinking (like the man at Arnforth) that he was mad. He turned and rode on quickly, calling out "Armed truce it is, sir," over his shoulder. Lord Darron and Susannah followed, up a hill past the church, under wide bare chestnut trees, and into the black wood around the Endwait manor house.

The drawbridge was up, blocking the gateway. The moat was only frozen at the edges, so it could not be crossed except by the bridge. A thick and unfriendly-looking man was leaning out of the window above the gateway, chewing something and watching them ride up.

"Lower the bridge, there," called Lord Darron. "I have business with the steward."

"What business?" asked the man, and spat what he was chewing into the moat.

Lord Darron was so much put out at this that he stammered. "Poor man," thought Susannah. "He *is* as nervous as he looks. Not a very good St. George at all." Then she had an inspiration. "Lord Darron," she whispered, "say you want to lock us in the dungeon with Alex."

Lord Darron looked at Harry. "But I—"

"Say it, sir. It will get us in."

So Lord Darron cleared his throat and called out what his business was in a clear and threatening way, which made Susannah very nervous. She was afraid she had put ideas into his head. The man above growled and went away inside. After a good five minutes, they heard men talking inside the window and the drawbridge at last came clanking down. An old, ribby oak door beyond was pushed creaking open. Susannah shivered at the sight of the dark way in.

Lord Darron, as he moved towards the drawbridge, spoke to Harry—rather cleverly, Susannah thought—disguising what he said by singing it

to a strange flat tune. "Have ready your strange weapon, my lord. We may need it, although I mistrust it much. There is a prophecy—tra-la-la—which has it that our realm shall be ended by outlandish weapons. Tra-dah-liddle-diddle-da." The last part of the tune came echoing back at them, mixed with the ringing of hoofs as Lord Darron went in under the archway.

Susannah's pony, which distrusted the drawbridge as much as she did, scuttled over after him. Harry cocked his pistol again and came last on the creaking, clanking boards of the bridge. Inside, in the tiny courtyard, he found Lord Darron already talking to the steward.

The steward was a thick sulky man and, like the guard at the gate, he was chewing something, with his arms rudely folded.

"The drawbridge is down. You can ride out again, my lord," he said.

"Not until we have seen the Prince," said Lord Darron.

"You cannot see him."

"I demand to."

The steward sighed, not a polite sigh. It was meant to show that Lord Darron was a fool who was boring him stiff. "I cannot think what the Count was at, telling you of all people that the Prince is here. What do you think you are at, too, entering this manor on false pretences? You may not see the Prince. He is mad. Straw in his hair, see." As he said that, the steward put both hands to his head, pointing upwards and waggling his fingers. Susannah had never seen anything so rude.

"You abominable man!" she said.

"You are a low knave," said Lord Darron. "Show me the Prince before I show you my sword with your blood on it."

The steward grinned. "Show me what you like." Then he looked up with a whistle and a nod. Soldiers and serving-men came running from doorways where they must have been waiting, carrying swords, carving knives, pokers and axes. They stood round the three riders panting, looking up at them and grinning, for all the world, Susannah thought, like a pack of mongrel dogs who had treed three cats.

"Harry!" she said.

"Now," said the steward, "my fine lord, you can ride back over yon drawbridge or there will be murder and maiming done."

Lord Darron was looking completely helpless. Susannah was terrified. Harry knew that he would have to use his pistol. But he had only six bullets and he could not bear to kill, or even wound anyone.

"We are not going away," he said, and he had to shout in order to make himself talk at all. "We do not leave until we see the Prince. Show us the Prince or I will shoot you all with this pistol."

"Shoot!" said the steward sneeringly. "Pistol! Is that a sawn-off spade you have there, my lord?"

Harry was so angry with him that he raised the pistol and pulled the trigger. Susannah screamed—to encourage him, she said afterwards. The bang was deafening in the tiny courtyard. Half the men dropped their weapons and backed away. The steward roared with pain and clapped his hand to his left ear. Harry was so angry that he hoped he had shot it off. In fact, he had only grazed it, but the sight of blood running between the steward's fingers was enough for most of the men.

"Sorcery!" they yelled, and ran clattering away through the archway and over the drawbridge.

A few of the soldiers stayed where they were. One or two pretended to smile, but when Harry swung the pistol round to point at them they turned and ran like rabbits.

Lord Darron reached down and caught the steward by the hair as he tried to run away too. Susannah admired him more than ever for that, because his horse was trampling this way and that in terror at the noise. "Not you," he shouted. "You come with us. You have the keys." He called out to Harry: "Shoot him again if he shows any sign of treachery."

"I will," said Harry. He dismounted and handed his reins to Susannah. Then he walked slowly and fiercely up to the steward with his pistol pointing at the man's terrified face. "Where is this dungeon? You go first, and if you dare attempt any treachery—"

Lord Darron landed beside him with a crash of plate-armour. "Give the keys here, man."

The steward unhooked a great bunch of keys and handed them to Lord Darron. Harry thought he had never ever seen a man so frightened as that steward. His face was yellow, like a candle, among the streaks of blood. And he agreed afterwards with Susannah that Lord Darron showed not the slightest sign of fear.

When they went down to the dungeon and among their ringing footsteps Harry could hear the steward's teeth chattering. They let him unlock the first door. Susannah, who was expecting to find the dungeon beyond, was frightened and disappointed to find only more stairs.

"I will stay by this door," said Lord Darron. "We do not want it treacherously bolted on us." He stood leaning on the door, and Harry thought, from the way he could see the white of the steward's eyes, that this was just what the man had hoped to do. He dug him in the neck with the pistol.

"Go on."

Susannah was horrified by the second door. It was so low and narrow and thickly barred. "Oh, poor Alex!" It was she who had to undo the chains and bolts, for Harry was guarding the steward. But there was a padlock she could not unlock, and Harry had to help her. The moment he moved, the steward ran away upstairs. Harry fired at him, wildly and dangerously, for the bullet hit the stone ceiling and bounced back almost in his own face. The steward screamed, and was suddenly quiet as he met Lord Darron's sword.

Inside the dungeon, they heard Harry fire. From there it was muffled and horrible.

"Alex," said Everard, "if this is our last hour, I am sorry I said I disliked you. I do not think it was true."

"We were just furious with one another," said Alex. "How do they put people to death here?"

"Various ways. Nobility are beheaded. I shall insist they behead you too. You must not be hanged."

Then the door opened and Alex saw the last people he would ever have expected to see: Harry Courcy leaning anxiously in with the pistol smoking in his hand, and Susannah picking up her skirts and jumping down into the dungeon. She ran up to Alex and flung her arms round him. Alex was so astonished that he looked at Everard and roared with laughter.

"Oh, Alex, dear! Have they hurt you?" Susannah said. "Are you all right? Why! You have a great bump on your forehead!" She let Alex go and marched up to Everard. "Did you hit him, you wicked, vicious boy?"

"Yes, my lady," Everard said.

"Then you are a great cowardly bully! You are twice his size!" Susannah was shaking her fist. Alex was afraid she would hit Everard.

"Be quiet, Susannah," he said. "You can say things like that to me if you like, but you have no business to say them to Everard. He is not a coward or a bully, and besides he must be related to you far back. He has an ancestor called Eleanor de Courcy."

Harry jumped down into the dungeon too. "Really?" he said. "Five hundred years ago? The one who was said to be drowned in the quicksands? Are you Prince Everard? Then I am very pleased to meet you, Your Highness. We have a message from a lady—she must be your mother I think. She has gone to the nuns at Uldrim."

"Praised be!" said Everard. "Then she cannot be married to Towerwood. Alex, I am so relieved."

They all four milled about in the straw for a minute or so longer, Alex introducing the Courcys and the Courcys explaining why they came. And Alex found, in spite of his relief at being rescued, that he was not as

glad as he might have been. "Now," he thought, "the Courcys and Everard will get on together splendidly. They are the same kind of people. I shall be nowhere."

Then he found Susannah looking up at him, in tears. "Alex," she said, "I am so sorry. Please forgive me for all the horrid things I said to you. I did not mean them, truly. Ask your friend the Prince to forgive me too. I dare not." Then she smudged at her face with her sleeve. "Have you a handkerchief, please?"

Alex gave her his own grubby handkerchief and Susannah sniffed miserably into it. He could hardly believe she had had a change of heart, but he tried to be kind to her. He was so unused to being nice to Susannah that he did not know where to begin. He settled for saying: "It does not matter, Susannah. I am sure Everard does not mind."

Then the lordly Harry thumped him on the back. "Alex, we have been worried sick about you. I—I am so sorry for—that time. And we have not found Cecilia. Do you know where she is?"

"Alex," said Everard, "let us climb out of this dungeon. We must find your sister—she could be still at Falleyfell—and I must see Robert, if he is to be found."

Alex was astonished and pleased and ashamed of himself. Here had the Courcys come all this way to rescue him and he was not being grateful enough. Here they were both apologising, and he was being gruff; and here he was expecting Everard to take to the Courcys when in fact they were all three of them deferring to him, as if he were a cross between their leader and their interpreter.

Lord Darron was standing in the doorway. "My lord," he said to Everard, "will you climb out? This is a noisesome place for a Prince, whether he be mad or sane."

"He is not mad," Alex said. "That is Towerwood put that about. Nor do I claim the coronet. Everard understands that now. It was a mistake."

Lord Darron smiled, blinked, and held down a hand each to Alex and Everard. "Come up, both of you. I never thought you claimed the coronet, sir. Your face is too honest."

Alex and the Prince scrambled out of the dungeon past Lord Darron and stood smiling delightedly at one another. As Lord Darron was helping Susannah out, they both began talking at once.

"Darron, where is Robert, my cousin Howeforce? I want to—"

"Please, sir, have you any news of my sister?"

Lord Darron put Susannah gently down between them. "There, young lady. You have done famously for one so young. As to your ques-

tions, both of them have the same answer. Howeforce is defeated and flying for his life, I fear, together with the young lady. Towerwood is close after them. Indeed, he might have caught them by now."

PART IV
Cecilia's Last Ride

Chapter 1 – Hunt

Now we come to Cecilia and how she was probably very foolish. The first thing she did when the outlaws appeared at the top of the cliff was to hang onto Lord Tremath's foot again, as if by doing that she could somehow stop his whole army. The outlaws were all standing where they were with no triumph left in them. Most of them suddenly looked tired out, particularly Robert. He rode slowly towards Lord Tremath and his squire, who were both smiling. Cecilia felt like giving Lord Tremath's foot a hearty tug, she thought it so mean of him to smile.

"I know the Perland caves like the back of my hand, Robert," said the squire.

"So I see," said Robert. "My lord, I must beg you to let no harm come to Cecilia. May I implore you not to hand her over to Conrad of Towerwood, whatever you do to the rest of us?"

Cecilia was so touched by this that she must indeed have tugged Lord Tremath's foot. He looked down at her in surprise. "Where is the Prince, Robert?" he said. "I must know that before I make another move in this affair."

"I do not know, my lord. He is not with us, nor with Towerwood, and Towerwood came upon us before my spies returned from Gairne."

"You sent to Gairne!" exclaimed the squire. "Then has Towerwood—?" Cecilia, looking up at him, decided that he must be Lord Tremath's son. He had the same grey eyes.

"I will trust you, Robert," Lord Tremath interrupted. "I will take no part in this battle. And, since time is short, tell me what you wish me to do."

Cecilia saw that Robert was amazed. "Thank you, my lord," he said. Lord Tremath smiled at him. The squire laughed and, as soon as he really believed them, Robert laughed as well. Rupert Lord Strass came up beside him, laughing too, and they began to talk together hurriedly, not needing to say much, as if they knew one another very well.

"I think," Cecilia thought, "they must all have been great friends before the Prince was killed." She stood low down in the midst of them, still in danger of being trampled on, and was just able to see the other outlaws coming clustering round, listening and smiling. Soldiers in Lord

Tremath's army were waving to them and calling out jokes. Cecilia could have cried with delight.

The squire leant forward to Lord Strass. "Rupert," he said anxiously, "is James dead?"

"No, but he needs care at once. Ralph, could you ask your father—?"

Lord Tremath looked at James of March hanging over Rupert's horse. "We must take James then. You too, Rupert, I think. We shall call you hostage. We will take all those on foot and the wounded. Ralph must see them safely to Tremath. The rest must fend for themselves. Do you agree, Robert? I shall not let Towerwood near them, and I will suspend justice until the Prince is found. I myself will go to Gairne and enquire for him."

"Cecilia," said Robert, "you must go to Tremath with Ralph." He was bending down, smiling at her, and Cecilia looked up regretfully, afraid he would be killed. His eyes were black. She had never seen eyes so dark and likeable, and she could not bear never to see them again.

Then Tom, came bursting through the outlaws beside her with blood on his beard and his orange livery hacked with sword-cuts. "My lords, I don't know what ye decide among ye, but Towerwood found the secret passages. Half on his men be coming up them. The rest on 'em be a-riding round the valley to come up here."

"Then quick, Robert," said Lord Tremath. "I can do nothing for you until I know the Prince's will. You must ride away."

The outlaws ran and rode backwards here and there to give Robert a path. His great blue horse turned round, willing but weary, and horse and rider seemed to Cecilia to be lost already, surrounded in foggy breath—their own and that of the people crowding away from them.

It was then that Cecilia was foolish. She ran after Robert screaming: "Take me too. Please, Robert, do not leave me behind!" Robert stopped and looked down at her as if he simply did not know what to say. Cecilia knew she was embarrassing him again, but she did not care. "Please!" she said. She knew he would have to say no. She knew the Tremaths, the outlaws and all the army were staring, but she was too far gone in foolishness to care.

"I will take you if you wish," Robert said, "but you will be safer with Ralph."

Cecilia was so astonished at what he said that she had not the presence of mind to refuse. She knew she should have pretended to change her mind so that he could hurry away, but she was foolish still. "I do not want to be safe," she said. "Let me ride behind you."

Robert held down one hand to help her mount. He did not seem in the least angry, or worried that his horse would have so much more work to do.

"Wait," said Ralph of Tremath. Cecilia turned and saw him coming off his own great eager horse. "My horse is fresh," he said. "He can more easily take two than yours. He stood smiling and offering Cecilia his reins and Cecilia remembered him like that gratefully for the rest of her life. He had one of the brightest, sweetest smiles she had ever seen, and his hair was bright red-brown. He was a year younger than she was then, but he lived to a great old age and was the great-grandfather of Edward the Unlucky.

In a few seconds, Robert and Cecilia were away. For a moment, Ralph of Tremath was beside them on Robert's horse, saying: "We will delay him as long as we can. Trust my father, Robert." Then he had turned aside and the great horse was rushing downhill alone, making an icy wind and smashing the hard crust of the snow with its huge feet. Behind them, the outlaws and the army gave a cheer. Cecilia, with her fingers twisted in Robert's orange cloak, looked back and saw them all watching, but as she looked, they turned away and went crowding up to the cliff-edge. She saw men in Towerwood's livery climbing up beside them. Looking further round, she saw a line of black riders galloping up the hill from the open end of the valley.

Robert looked over his shoulder too. "Have they seen us?"

"No," shouted Cecilia. The men were all hurrying to the top of the cliff, obviously sure that Tremath had caught the outlaws. None of them looked their way. She turned to look forward and hoped that Lord Tremath and his son would be able to keep the Hornets safe from Towerwood, when Towerwood discovered they had let Robert go. Maybe there would be another battle—between Towerwood and Tremath this time.

The horse turned slightly to the right. Robert had moved into the wide trampled track which the Tremath army had made marching from the direction of the coast. They followed this for a long way, with their own hoof-marks almost hidden in it, until they reached a road. The army had come along the road, from the left, and again they followed the mass of deep blue prints.

"I hope," Robert called over to Cecilia, "I hope they will think we have gone to Tremath. We will turn off soon."

They turned off when there was a lane leading south again over the hills. Several horses had gone that way before them, and again their prints were almost hidden. By this time the horse was blowing and Robert let it walk for a space. There was a farm at the end of the lane.

"They are friendly here," Robert said. "We shall get something to eat. You must be hungry, Cecilia."

"So must you," said Cecilia, realising that the outlaws must have been attacked before they had a chance to eat breakfast.

Robert laughed. "I could eat this horse—except that we would never reach the Forest if I did. I think we must go to the Forest. It is full of hiding-places. Everard has a hunting-lodge there which I think we can make use of. Something tells me that if ever the Prince gets out of Towerwood's hands, he will not blame me. I wish we could do more than hope Tremath can find him."

"And we cannot?" Cecilia asked, thinking of Alex.

The horse stopped in the middle of the farmyard. Robert turned round, looking very sad and serious. "My dear Cecilia, it is possible we cannot save even ourselves. You must promise me, now, before we dismount, that you will run or ride away if I tell you to."

"Because I am an Outsider? Yes, Robert, I promise." Cecilia slid down the warm dampish side of the horse and stood in the snow, feeling very small and melancholy.

Robert dismounted too. "Not only because you are an Outsider," he said sadly, "but because Towerwood is utterly ruthless. Do you know, Cecilia, he stood before his whole army and told me he had forced my poor mother to take poison? A man who can do that can do anything."

"Oh, Robert!" said Cecilia.

The farmer came striding over on the slippery snow just then. "We hear that news too, my lord," he said. "Best come inside, but we cannot have ye for long. Had orders again not to give ye help this morning." Cecilia thought he did not look the kind of man who would willingly help anyone. He was tall and yellow and surly. She supposed at first that Robert must have paid him a great deal of money to be his ally; but, when they came inside into a warm white-washed kitchen, and the farmer's wife and children came excitedly round, she realised she was wrong. The farmer was Tom's cousin and very glad to hear he was still alive. They were given breakfast, a homely ordinary breakfast which, apart from there being no tea, was very like the supper she and Alex had given Robert a fortnight before. She was sure Robert was remembering that, because he seemed embarrassed again.

It was here that they heard the story of the Prince being mad.

"Heard say last night," said the farmer. "Messenger from Towerwood to Tremath. Telling everyone the Prince were mad."

Robert stood up from the table so indignantly that the farmer's youngest little girl began to cry. Cecilia hurriedly coaxed her to stop, not knowing what to think, except that she was terrified for Alex.

"Everard!" said Robert. "That old wives' story again! Will you all do me the kindness to contradict it whenever you hear it. It is much more likely the poor boy is dead. Everard flies into rages because he is an only son and somewhat spoilt. He will grow out of that. It means nothing that

his mother and father are first cousins. I will not have old women shaking their heads and talking of madness. As if any Prince has ever been mad!"

"Aye, my lord," said the farmer's wife, "we'll give them the lie, never fear. Ye need madness in the family if it's to take them this young, and we know there be none. Why else do they say in times of trouble that all are mad save the Prince alone?"

"And if Everard lives, he will prove that saying true," Robert answered. "Come, Cecilia."

They rode on again, this time boldly across country. The sun was well up now and the land glittered yellow and blue until Cecilia's eyes ached. Beside them, the powdery snow flew up from under its hard crust in winking rainbows like a shower of ground diamonds. Cecilia a rode astride, which was a great deal easier, and almost enjoyed herself. But whenever she felt too happy she made herself look over her shoulder at the bare rolling hills to see if Towerwood was following yet. She knew he would follow and hunt them down. Their position was nearly as hopeless as it could be. They would be tracked from place to place in the snow until they were run to earth.

"Robert," she said, "why do you not come Outside again with me?"

She saw Robert hump his shoulders as he thought about it. "From habit, I think," he answered. "But I will, as a last resort. Let us see what happens."

A little after this, they took to a lane again to disguise their trail. Round a corner, between high bare hedges, they met a man, an odd, wild, ragged person with great long legs. His toes would have trailed in the snow on either side of his donkey if he had not kept his feet bent awkwardly backwards. Robert reined in. Cecilia peered round him at the wild man's thin face, which was much the shape of the sole of a boot. He looked up at her, as interested as she was, and smoothed his straggling steel-coloured hair in her honour. It was Robert he spoke to.

"They are following you, my lord."

"How near are they?" Robert asked.

The man stuck out his chin, the toe of his boot-face, and seemed to be watching something in the air. "Catching up, my lord. You have five miles or so to play with. They have bloodhounds with them."

"Thank you, Aaron," Robert answered and sounded very dismayed. "Then I need your advice. What shall I do with Cecilia?"

"Take her. You will need her help . Go south to the lands Outside where you are both safe. I need not tell you to find a river, my lord, to throw the dogs off the scent."

"No," said Robert. "You need not." He began to ride on, but the man held out one long arm to stop him.

"I wish I had met you before," he said. "The Prince is at Endwait, in a dungeon, I think."

"Endwait! What barbarity! We will go there, then."

The man shook his wild head. "You will not get there. My Lord March and his men are returning along the Endwait road. Go south-west, through the Forest. I will go to Endwait. Farewell."

Robert rode much faster after that. Cecilia had to shout against the wind when she wanted to talk to him.

"Who was that man? How did he know we are being followed with dogs?"

"He is a wandering magician, a seer, and a teller of tales. If he offers advice unasked, as he did then, what he says is true." Then they rode for some miles before Robert spoke again. "Endwait!" he said. "Everard's father was killed there. That is cruel."

By this time they were down from the hills. The lands around were cultivated. The snow was in ribs along ploughed fields, with farms and cottages and ever more trees. Cecilia thought they must be coming to the Forest. Robert surprised her by telling her they were already in it.

"It becomes thicker in the south," he said. "Here is another river." He was finding every stream and river that he could and riding down or up them to cover their trail. The long edge of Cecilia's habit was soaked with the splashing. They rode straight, otherwise, sometimes right beside farmyards. When people were about they stared, shading their eyes, but then usually they smiled and waved as they saw the Gairne orange.

The sun began to set. Cecilia was frozen and tired by then but she had still to endure the Forest. It was thick around them at last and the snow was thinner and damper under the bare branches. Cecilia found it terrifying. It was so black and white and so quiet. Everywhere she looked white arcades of snow wound away between black trees, and every noise was too loud. Their hoofs seemed to break the forest open with their din and yet she could hear every slight creeping rustle, every creaking branch, and every cry of every bird. A train of black things went rushing away to one side and she had to hang onto Robert for fear she should faint with horror. Robert started as well, but he said calmly: "Those were deer. This is Everard's Ride and they are the Prince's game."

"I—I see," said Cecilia. She wished they could ride as fast as the deer ran. Their horse was going slowly now. It was tired out and Robert was avoiding trees only by dragging its head away from them. They wound on, from glade to glade, down rides and past black holly-brakes. Cecilia took each bush for a monster, or worse, for a cluster of Towerwood's men.

"Did you hear that?" said Robert. The horse stopped. Cecilia heard, in the empty soundless space, dogs baying, not far away. This time she was too frightened even to think of fainting.

"Cecilia," said Robert, "you must ride away now. I will get down and chance my luck on foot."

"No," said Cecilia. "I will not. How can I ride away now when I have come so far? I have held you up by my foolishness. You could have been Outside by now if I had not slowed the horse down. The least I can do is stay."

"You promised me, Cecilia."

"That was this morning."

There were sounds, a long way over to the right. Men were moving through the woods, slowly, calling out to one another as they went. Robert said: "*Now* will you ride away?" and slid off the horse. Cecilia, clutching his cloak, slid off too and came thumping down on her knees. Robert picked her up with a jerk. He was annoyed, and Cecilia knew he had every right to be angry with her, but she was still foolish.

"Let me come too," she begged.

Far over on the left, there came another crowd of men. These had lights, flaring and jerking from tree to tree.

"It is too late now for you to do anything else," said Robert. "We will leave the horse, since he might throw the dogs off our scent, and maybe we can slip between them on foot. But you must do exactly as I tell you."

"Yes," said Cecilia, very meek now she had won.

They began walking softly from tree to tree. Robert whispered that a sudden rush would give them away, since the men would looking for that. So they went slowly and steadily one behind the other, while to the right and left, the men walked level with them. Cecilia heard the commands called. She saw their dark shapes, flickering as trees came between her and them, and she saw more and more of those flaring lights. There were lights behind, too, and more commands. The dogs were there, behind them. Cecilia knew they would be seen any moment, or their footprints. She herself, in her lavender blue, did not stand out much against the snow, but Robert's orange seemed to glow more brilliantly with every second the light faded.

From behind, there was a sudden terrible barking and yelling.

"They have found the horse," Robert whispered. "But the hunting-lodge is very near. If we can reach that we can hide there easily."

Cecilia knew it was hopeless. They had seen their footprints and were coming faster, shouting hunting-cries as if she and Robert had been beasts. The men on either side were moving inwards towards them, calling across to one another. And there were men in front of them now. Cecilia guessed that these must have been to the hunting-lodge and were now coming back to the others. Everyone seemed to have lanterns or naked torches. There were lights all round. She could see faces, spear-heads, and

shining breast-plates. She and Robert stopped by a tree and waited. There was nothing else they could do.

"Robert," said Cecilia bravely, "I am sorry. This is my fault. I am sorry I embarrassed you by coming too."

"I am glad you are here," Robert answered. "And remember that if you had not come I would have ridden my own horse, which would have been foundered by now."

"But I made a scene," Cecilia whispered. She felt she must talk in order not to think of the closing circle of soldiers. They were very near now.

"Not really," Robert answered. Then he laughed. "But you surprised us all. Now, tell me, Cecilia—I must know, even if it is only to die with the knowledge—why do you always go out of your way to remind me of your humble origins? Why do you insist on being no lady?"

"Because I—because of my father and the Courcys."

"Who are the Courcys?"

As the men steadily closed in, Cecilia tallied, very hurriedly, to get it all in before the end, and told him how she and Alex felt about the Courcys. Before she had finished she could actually see Towerwood himself, walking under a streaming flare, with a bloodhound stretching its leash in front of him.

"I see," said Robert. "You have explained more than you knew, Cecilia. You make me almost able to forgive Towerwood, because I think his family have felt similarly towards the Counts of Gairne. And, Cecilia, if we are anything to judge by, then the Courcys cannot be a black as you have painted them." As he said this, he drew his sword, quietly and calmly.

"No," Cecilia admitted. "They are not black at all, really."

Conrad of Towerwood saw them as she spoke. He stopped, and the shout he gave to stop his soldiers was a fierce as a tiger's roar. There was such horrible triumph in it that Cecilia forgot the Courcys and her father and even Alex.

The soldiers stood round in a close ring while Towerwood handed the bloodhound's leash to someone else and stepped forward.

"Well, Howeforce, I have you at last. Give me your sword."

"Who comes to take it, Towerwood?"

Towerwood folded his arms. "Not I, my lord." Then he jerked his head at the circle of soldiers. "Disarm him. Tie him to that tree."

Twenty soldiers rushed forward. Cecilia was suddenly engulfed in a crowd of hard bodies, grim dark faces and flashing sword-blades. She screamed. A soldier tried to push her out of the way and that reminded her what Tom had said of Outsiders. She rushed in among them, then, fighting and punching her way towards Robert.

"Mind out! Don't you dare kill me! I am an Outsider! Out of my way!"

They let her through. Swords were hurriedly snatched away as she struggled past. She reached Robert. He was against a tree and without his sword now, but he had dagger. He snatched that out of her way as she came.

"I shall embarrass you again," Cecilia shrieked, almost laughing. "I am hysterical," she thought, "like Charlotte Courcy." She put her arms round Robert and screamed over her shoulder at the soldiers: "You dare touch him now. Kill me and see what happens!"

They stood back a little, doubtfully. Robert said sadly: "It will not last, Cecilia. You will only get hurt."

Towerwood was shouting: "You fools! Pull that girl away."

Nobody did, to Cecilia's surprise. The soldiers did not seem to know what to do. Then Towerwood himself came, pushing his men aside. He took Cecilia by her shoulders and wrenched her away. As he carried her back past the soldiers, he commanded: "Now tie him up." They had already bustled forward before he spoke. Robert was tied to the tree when Cecilia flung back her hair and looked.

"Now, Howeforce," said Towerwood, "you shall die by inches. Every soldier will throw a spear or a dagger at you, but I shall have the final thrust."

Robert did not answer. The soldiers came slowly nearer, some drawing daggers, some testing spear-edges on their hands. Cecilia screamed. She raged. She was angrier than she had ever been in her life. She twisted out of Towerwood's hands and turned on him. Most of him was hateful hard armour, but she could reach his fat cruel face. She hit him and scratched him, she pulled his hair and she called him names. He tried to push her away, calling out to the soldiers to stop her, but none of them moved a finger to help him. Perhaps they thought Towerwood should be able to manage a mere girl on his own, or perhaps they were glad to see their leader getting something of what he deserved. Whatever it was, they did not move.

"You great toad!" Cecilia screamed.

"Throw your spears—at Howeforce!" shouted Towerwood. "Confound you, girl!" With that, he managed to gather both Cecilia's wrists in one hand. "You will pay for this, you thing from a gutter!"

Chapter 2 – Kill

Everard wanted to go and find Robert at once. "Towerwood must be stopped," he said.

But Lord Darron and Susannah had discovered that he and Alex had eaten next to no food for more than twenty-four hours. They would not hear of it.

"You must eat first or you will faint on the way," said Lord Darron.

"Alex would be ill," Susannah told Lord Darron. "He often is."

Everard refused to eat in Endwait Manor. Nobody blamed him, and when they discovered that the stables were empty, they all agreed to go down to the village and find food and horses there. They walked, leading the three horses. Halfway across the drawbridge, Everard stopped.

"Alex," he asked anxiously, "have I any straws in my hair?"

Alex laughed. "One or two." He helped pick them out, but Everard seemed just as anxious when they were gone. "You must not worry, Everard," Alex said. "One has only to look at you to see you are not mad."

They stopped at the first house they came to, a fair-sized cottage set back in a large garden. At the gate was a post with a cartwheel hanging from it, to show that the owner was a wheelwright. Lord Darron opened the gate and started up the neat path between rows of snow-covered cabbages.

"No," said Everard, "I will go on my own. You come if you think I need help."

The people who lived in the house must have been watching, because they came out of the front door as Everard reached it. The man stood in front, and his wife looked nervously at Everard from behind her husband's elbow. Everard bowed politely and began explaining. The wheelwright backed away a little and the woman hid behind him completely.

"Oh, Alex!" said Susannah. "Go and help him out."

"No, wait," said Harry.

The woman ran out from behind the man, made a little curtsey, threw her arms round Everard and kissed him. Then there was a lot of excited talk between the man and the woman, the woman holding Everard's hand, pointing to him and then to the Manor and then to the others waiting in the road. The man talked to Everard. Finally, Everard turned and beckoned to the others to come. Everyone was smiling. The man himself came and showed them up the garden path.

"You are welcome to all we have to offer," he said.

He turned out to have just the right things to offer, a table ready laid with new loaves, damson jam and a great fruit cake, and a stable full of handsome horses. They had an excellent meal. Everard chattered and laughed all through. He asked the wheelwrignt and his wife to eat with them, but they would not.

"I want to see you have a proper meal," the woman said. "And I'll do that best by standing over you, Your Highness. To think of you starving up at the manor and none of us knowing a thing about it!"

The meal was so full of chatter and exclamations like this, that it was a marvel they made any plans, but, somehow, they did. While they were finding out that Towerwood was already proving a mean, grabbing

landlord, they were arranging to take a fresh horse each and to leave the Courcys' horses in their place. While Alex explained how he came to be in the dungeon too, Everard was discovering that Lord Tremath had indeed gone to Gairne to look for them. Towerwood had been too anxious to follow Robert to waste time fighting Lord Tremath.

"Then, Darron," he said, "you must find him and tell him to follow us. We shall make for Bress and then Tremath, since Robert went that way. But we shall need men to help us against Towerwood. How glad I am that Tremath has proven such a friend! I thought he was too fond of Robert to be of any help to me."

Lord Darron wanted to take Susannah with him and leave the three boys to find Robert alone, but Susannah was as foolish as Cecilia. As she pointed out, she had come so far without danger that it seemed she would not be harmed. So it was settled. Everard, Alex, Harry and Susannah mounted the wheelwright's horses and rode out into the cold street again, calling goodbye and thank you as they went. Lord Darron went through the back-gate on a short-cut to Gairne over the hills.

Everard and Alex both looked back at the people who had helped them so cheerfully as they stood waving at their gate. The woman had come out in the cold with much too little on in order to say goodbye. Alex thought it would take a great deal to better their ordinary down-to-earth niceness. They reminded him of the Gatlys.

"Alex," said Everard, "what can I give them to reward them, that would not offend them too much? I would like to reward them for believing me as much as for their help."

"Why not give them Endwait?" Alex suggested, but he thought as he said it that probably, here, people needed to be noble to own land.

"What an excellent idea!" said Everard. "That is exactly right. They are just the people! Alex, you must be my advisor if we—if we manage this next part successfully."

Harry had been whispering to Susannah meanwhile. Now he rode up beside Everard and shyly held out his pistol. "Your Highness, Susannah and I think you ought to have this. We found out—the lady in the house told us—that no-one would dare kill us."

"Thank you," said Everard gravely. "How do I use it?" the three boys rode with their heads together, and Harry and Alex explained about firearms. Alex found the other two still deferred to him, rather than to each other—which was just as well in this case, because he was better than Harry at explaining how things worked.

Susannah trotted impatiently ahead. Around her, the snow in the valley was already pink in the late winter afternoon. They had miles to go and it would be dark in less than two hours.

"Oh, hurry, do!" she called over her shoulder. Then she looked in front again and saw a strange wild man with a face like a boot riding on a donkey much too small for him. "Oh, my goodness!"

The man pointed at her. "Eleanor de Courcy lives in you. Am I right?"

Susannah did not quite know what to say. "Well, sir, my name is Susannah Courcy, really—" But Everard came galloping up in a flurry of snow and interrupted her.

"Aaron! Do you have any news? Do you know anything of my cousin Robert?"

When Aaron told them now he had met Robert and Cecilia and where he had advised them to go. "But," he said, "they will not reach the lands Outside. Their horse was too laden and already tiring. Towerwood was gaining fast."

"Then," said Everard, "I think I can find them, even if we come too late. Thanks, Aaron. Ask for any gift you like when I come back." Then he said to the others: "We must hurry. Luckily the Forest is not too far from here. I would stake Landerness that Robert has gone to my hunting-lodge."

They hurried out of the valley and over the bridge. Then they turned left, into the red sun, and galloped. Alex was so worried about Cecilia that he was angry. He called out from time to time to whichever person happened to be galloping beside him:

"He did not need to take Cecilia! They must both be daft! What was she doing there?"

"Coming along, too, like me," said Susannah. "I would have done the same, if it had been you, Alex."

"Save your breath," said Harry, and grinned to show it was not meant to be rude.

Everard simply shook his head, as worried as Alex.

After that it was all hard riding. They galloped along the road until the hills on either side were lower. Then they came out into the great upper part of the Laisle valley, with fields and farms and woods as far as they could see under the sun. Harry realised that the Principality was not under-populated at all. Here, it seemed several times more cultivated than around his own Arnforth. He had scarcely time to think this, though, before Everard swung away from this wide land to the left, beside a signpost. Now they rode with the sun shining low across them, towards a black mass of woods in the distance.

It seemed as if the woods came out to meet them. First they passed bushes, then spinneys of beeches, then bigger clumps of woodland, and then a great area where ancient oaks stood here and there as they might in

a gentleman's park. There, at last, as the sun was almost down, they entered the thick wood. Trees spun about them as they galloped, falling into new patterns, this way and that, as if they were riding in a black and white kaleidoscope. By this time, Susannah, good horsewoman though she was, was almost too tired to keep her seat. Harry, almost as tired, was riding all bunched up, like a bad jockey.

"Do you know what this is called?" Everard said. "This part of the Forest, I mean."

"What?" asked Alex.

"Everard's Ride. After Everard I, who reigned seven hundred years ago. Listen!"

They all stopped and Harry jolted upright, pushing his fingers into his aching eye-sockets. They could hear the bloodhounds, far off, giving tongue. If they shut their eyes and listened even harder, they could just hear men shouting.

Everard stretched his arm out, pointing in the direction he thought the sound came from. The others nodded. All of them were used to hunting. Then Everard moved his arm on, pointing beyond the sound, to where he thought the quarry might be. The others nodded again.

"If we go that way," Everard said, "we can expect to come up for the—" Then he stopped, because he had nearly said "kill" and the others all knew he had. "Ride," he said. "Like the wind."

And they rode like the wind. Susannah's dark and Everard's fair hair streamed. They leapt bushes and crashed through brakes. They rode with their faces on their horses' necks under whippy low branches, and they galloped down clear rides as if it was for their own lives they rode. The sun went down and they crashed along by their own and their horses' instinct. The sound of the dogs and the men came closer, converging on the same place for which they rode. Everard put out a hand and caught a half dead branch. Alex saw him nearly fall, pulling a small stick away to make another weapon. Alex tried to do the same, and almost wrenched his arm from its socket. Harry and Susannah were too tired even to try.

Then they saw lanterns and torches. They heard a horrible yelling, then nothing for a while. Then they heard Towerwood's shout of triumph, echoing round the whole wood. Then Alex heard Cecilia screaming. He hammered his horse with his fist. He and Everard together rushed between the last trees and came upon the backs of all Towerwood's waiting soldiers.

Everard went straight along them, slashing right and left with his stick. "Stand back there! Out of our way!" The soldiers surged aside, running and falling, too surprised to attack him. Alex rushed among then too, and they avoided him, though he hardly noticed them. He could see

Cecilia struggling with Towerwood and Robert tied to the tree beyond. Two spears were thrown at Robert as they came, but both stuck in the tree, harmlessly.

"Stop!" shouted Everard. "Anyone who raises a finger against Cecilia Hornby or my Lord Howeforce is a dead man. My men have you surrounded. Drop your weapons."

Alex realised that this was the only thing to say. He prayed that the soldiers would believe Everard. Otherwise, they were all as good as dead. Harry, still outside the line of soldiers, felt sick, knowing that he and Susannah were all the army Everard had.

For the moment at least, it worked. Towerwood was staring up at Everard as if he were a ghost, holding Cecilia's wrists as though he had forgotten her. The soldiers turned glumly to one another, muttering. Then first one man, then another, dropped his spear and unbuckled his sword. Everard waited, sitting very proud and high, until weapons were strewn in the snow all round. Then he turned just slightly to call over his shoulder.

"My Lord Henry Courcy, will you be so good as to collect these weapons."

There was an impressed, surprised muttering from the soldiers at the name of Courcy, but Harry shook in his saddle. He knew Everard had gone too far. His name was all very well, but what would the soldiers think when they saw he was only another small boy? Susannah wanted to giggle. She knew it was deadly serious, but she had to put her hands over her mouth in order to hide her laughter.

Harry rode out into the circle of soldiers, with the lanterns lighting him up from beneath, and dismounted to obey orders. To his utter astonishment, no-one interfered. He had not met Ralph of Tremath or James of March, or he would have realised that the soldiers were used to boys not much older than he was holding important commands and giving orders to men three times their age. Most of the men obligingly picked up their weapons for him. Two men muzzled the bloodhounds and tied them to a tree. Even the surliest kicked their swords and spears towards him without attempting to stop him.

Conrad of Towerwood, however, suspected him at once, probably more because he was an Outsider than because he was a boy. Towerwood watched Harry for a minute or so, and Alex and Everard watched Towerwood. They could see that he was planning something. At last he seemed to decide what to do.

"You fools!" he called to the soldiers. "The Prince has no more men than these boys. Seize them all, at once."

Everard raised Harry's pistol. "Another word, Towerwood, and I shall shoot you before you can move a muscle."

He should have shot him at once, but Alex could see he was nervous of the strange weapon. Towerwood looked up at him, his fat face all sucked inwards and crafty. Then he jerked Cecilia towards him and crouched down behind her. Cecilia writhed and kicked backwards, but it was like being locked in a steel fetter. She could not move.

"I dare you to shoot now," Towerwood called to Everard. And then he shouted to his men. "Seize them, you fools!"

Harry was still collecting weapons. By now he had a stack of them to one side of Towerwood. He expected any second that he would be rushed and overpowered, but not one soldier moved. He looked at what he could see of their faces. They were staring at Towerwood crouched behind Cecilia, at Robert against the tree, and at Everard and Alex. It was as if they had suddenly turned audience at a play.

Everard sighed and handed the pistol to Alex. "It is yours, Alex. You are an Outsider too, and she is your sister. You can shoot if anyone can."

Cecilia leant forward fiercely, the tears on her face shining in the lantern light and in the moonlight now suddenly streaming through the bare branches overhead. "Shoot him, Alex. Do not think of me. Shoot!"

Susannah called from beyond the soldiers: "Please do what she says, Alex."

But Alex could not, no more than Everard. It was impossible, even if he had been an expert marksman. It was too dark. Towerwood was almost entirely hidden behind Cecilia and Robert was just behind them. If he did not hit Cecilia, he would certainly hit Robert.

"Harry," he called, "take one of those swords and come at him from your side." He pulled his horse round, trying to come at Towerwood sideways on, opposite Harry.

Towerwood had foreseen this. He went scrambling backwards, lugging Cecilia, chinking and panting, until he was up against Robert. Alex rode right up to him and fired downwards, but it was not he who killed Towerwood. Before he had pulled the trigger, Towerwood sprang up, screaming, with Robert's dagger in his neck. Alex's bullet hit the ground and sent a shower of snow over Towerwood's body and into Harry's face. It could have killed Cecilia, who was lying beside him, in a dead faint for the first time in her life. Robert slashed away the ropes round his legs and picked her up.

The bang terrified the soldiers. They stopped being audience and became actors again. Most of then ran away, straight at Susannah. She fell off her horse and crouched in the snow, crying, expecting them to kill

her, but they did not see her. They stopped a few yards further on, shouting: "We yield, we yield," away into the woods.

Those who did not run away came slowly towards Everard and the others, some with daggers, some with spears snatched from Harry's stack, ready to revenge their leader.

"Stop!" said Everard. "Not a step nearer."

They came slowly on, though. They had almost reached Everard's horse, when a crowd of new soldiers descended on them.

"Tremath to the Prince! Yield yourselves prisoner."

Chapter 3 – Gone Away

The day was saved, thanks to Lord Tremath. They discovered later that he and half his army had been close behind them all the way, so close that Lord Tremath had actually seen them ride into the Forest; but his army had been slowed down by the thick wood and had only just arrived in time.

Lord Tremath had gone to Gairne after Robert rode away, only waiting to see his son set off safely for Tremath with all the other outlaws. Then he came to Gairne, he questioned Robert's spies and arrested all of Towerwood's people he could lay hands on. The spies knew very little, but by threatening Towerwood's men with the most terrible tortures, he found out enough to guess that Everard was in Endwait. He rode that way immediately, so, of course, Lord Darron missed him and it was Aaron, ambling towards Gairne on his donkey, who told him what had happened. Lord Tremath was exceedingly angry that Lord Darron had let the four children ride after Towerwood on their own. He walked up and down on the creaking floor of the hunting-lodge, telling them over and over again what he thought.

Everard whispered to Alex: "But he would have let his own son do it. Why not us?"

"Because you are the Prince, my lord," said Lord Tremath, overhearing him.

They spent the night at the hunting-lodge, which was only a hundred yards away. Cecilia did not come out of her faint until they got there, and all that time Alex was afraid he had killed her, although Robert told him six times that his bullet had missed.

As soon as it was plain that Cecilia was unhurt, Everard took Robert and Alex each by an elbow and pulled them away from her.

"Robert," he said, "I am going to amend two of our laws. I shall abolish the cutting-up of traitors and I shall forbid people to bury sui-

cides in the disgusting way they now do. Will I be right?" He gave Alex's arm a warning twitch as they waited for Robert to answer.

Robert looked sad, sadder and more tired even than Alex had seen him when he first came into their kitchen. He looked from Everard to Alex and then down at the many studs on his sword-belt, and ran his fingers along them. He seemed to be going to speak, and then stopped. Then, suddenly, when Alex thought he was not going to tell them after all, Robert looked at Everard again, as if he were very proud of him.

"Yes, Everard, you will be right. Towerwood had spent the whole night bullying Bertram, and your father and I were trying to calm him in the garden there. Of course, we did not know what Towerwood had said, but we had never seen Bertram so wrought up. He screamed at us to leave him alone and drew his dagger, but I think even then your father would have been safe, it he had not tried to take Bertram's dagger away. Bertram stabbed him during their tussle and then turned on me. He said: 'I have to kill you too, Robert,' but he killed himself instead."

"Oh, I see," said Everard quietly. "We should have thought of that, Alex. Towerwood would obviously be much more afraid of Robert than of me. Oh, Robert, you faced death twice that day.. I am sorry."

"It does not matter now," Robert answered.

For the rest of the evening everyone was cheerful. Susannah fell asleep smiling and had to be woken up for supper. Harry kept falling asleep too, and then waking up with a start, trying to remember something he had to say to Alex and Cecilia. Lord Tremath took off his armour and recited poems to them—his own, Alex realised, remembering the book he had read in Falleyfell library—and outside the lodge, the soldiers laughed and sang. They were encamped on the lawn at the back, where a hundred years later another army camped in much more desperate circumstances. The people in the lodge had only just enough food for them, but there was plenty of wine. Alex thought that he and Everard at least were a little drunk by bed-time. Their time in the dungeon struck them both as very funny, and they tried to explain to Robert. But Robert seemed sad.

"You are Count of Gairne again now," Everard kept telling him, to cheer him up, but that seemed to make him sadder than ever.

In the morning, they all rode back to Endwait to give the wheelwright his horses back. Harry, who had quite recovered after a night's sleep, remembered what it was he should have said last night.

"Alex, we must hurry home. Your father will be back from London today, and my father will be tearing his hair."

Alex knew he was right. He felt cold and sick, suddenly, at the thought of what Josiah might say. "Yes," he said.

"Oh, we can be hanged for sheep, Harry," said Susannah. "Now we have disappeared, let us stay disappeared for today."

"You will have to," said Robert. "You cannot reach the hardway through the bay until very late tonight, and I think the tide will be in then."

He, Everard and Cecilia worked it out, and found he was right. Everard was delighted and arranged for them to stay at Falleyfell that night and cross the bay the following day. So one of Lord Tremath's soldiers went galloping ahead to give Everard's orders, and the others made a wonderful leisurely journey through the Principality in the snow.

They went to Endwait, and there Everard promised the astonished wheelwright and his wife that the deeds of the land should be sent to them in the course of the next three days. Then they went onto Gairne. There Lord Darron met them, and to Cecilia's delight, he did show her one of the warehouses there. She and Susannah went into raptures over the beauty of the cloth.

"I would order bales of this," Cecilia said to Robert, "if only I could explain to Father where it came from."

Alex, who was still feeling cold and sick, went to see the castle with Harry and Everard. It was a splendid castle, just like the castle must have been on his island before it was ruined.

"No," said Everard, "mine is a great deal bigger. I will show you. Are you well, Alex?"

Alex said he was, but he was beginning to think that the way he was feeling could not be merely fear of Josiah.

They went to Falleyfell, later that day, and arrived in time for the small, melancholy funeral of Princess Mathilda, Countess of Gairne. Alex, feeling sicker than ever in the chapel, was thankful that she had a proper funeral and not the kind Everard had described.

"Shall we say my law is already in force?" Everard said later. "I will back-date it."

They did not see Robert again that evening. Susannah several times demanded loudly where he was, until Lord Darron took her aside and explained that the Princess was Robert's mother. Susannah burst into tears. She would have cried all evening, if the doors of the great square hall had not slammed open at that moment.

"Oh!" she said to Harry. "It's our lady!"

Princess Rosalind ran the whole length of the hall to kiss Everard. The two nuns with her looked a little shocked. When the Princess went on to kiss Susannah, Harry, Alex and Cecilia, they looked at one another as much as to say, "This lady has no idea of dignity." Then the Princess kissed Lord Darron and Lord Tremath too and the nuns left the hall.

Susannah remembered Lord Arbard and asked after him. She was told he was in his own mansion in Arbard, and feeling better already.

"I wish I was," Alex thought.

He was a great deal worse the following morning, but he got up grimly, ready to ride home. Cecilia was horrified.

"He is not fit to go," she said to Princess Rosalind.

Everard felt ill too. "It must have been those icicles we ate," he said. "You cannot go until you are well."

Alex insisted on going, though, and Harry backed him up. "It is not far," they said. "And we must go home before they give us up for dead."

So they set out for the coast. Robert went with them, still sad, until they reached the beginning of the hidden road. Then he turned back, with the horse Alex had borrowed from Everard, and the four Outsiders went on alone. Alex rode behind Harry. He was very glad to have an excuse to do so, because he felt so ill now that he could not have ridden alone. The brown sands swung and dipped around him and he shivered all the way. Cecilia wept all across the bay, and Harry and Susannah were hard put to it to keep cheerful.

They reached the Hornbys' farm in the early afternoon. Josiah was there, and so was Sir Edmund, come to have the quicksands searched for their bodies. There was the most terrible scene. Alex felt as if he were drowning in a flood or a storm—he could hardly hear or see or feel, and he knew he was letting the others down. They gave up all the various explanations they had discussed on the way home and tried to tell what had really happened. Neither father believed a word.

"Alex," said Josiah, "I know we'll get truth out of you. Out with it, boy. Where have you all been?"

Alex began to say that what the others said was quite true. It was very difficult because his throat had forgotten how to talk. Then something strange happened. The room turned upside down and Alex was floating on the floor of Josiah's study, looking down at the beams on the ceiling. He saw Susannah and Cecilia whisking about down there, talking to him. He thought they were trying to pull him down off the floor, but he did not want to move. He knew how flies felt walking on the ceiling and it was better than being down there with the others. Then Josiah surged in front of the girls. Alex shut his eyes and waited, but the next person who pulled at him was Miss Gatly. She plucked him down from the floor and carried him off to bed.

The oddest thing was that all the time there was part of Alex, a part just outside his head, over to the left, which knew perfectly well what was

happening. This part knew that the terrible scene went on, worse than ever, when they found he was ill. Cecilia was getting all the blame for dragging her brother about in the snow when he had a high fever. Josiah told her he never wanted to set eyes on her again. Alex knew, somehow, that Josiah had made some money for himself in London, as well as some for the Courcys, and that Cecilia was to be sent to a finishing school in Switzerland with what he had made. Until then, she was to stay in her room.

Alex felt this was horribly unfair of Josiah. He tried to tell Miss Gatly what he thought as she fussed and rattled him into his bed. "It was my fault just as much—really."

"Aye, love, but you mustn't fret yourself. Unfair it may be that you should be the apple of your father's eye and not your sister, but that's how it always has been. Besides, you are sick and she is not."

Alex gave up trying to protest and went into a long tunnel lined with horrible dreams. He dreamt of school and of Arnforth Hall and of the island, of the hidden road—which vanished and left him in the quicksands—and of Falleyfell and the Endwait dungeon. There, he wrestled for hours with Everard for the clasp-knife, and then, suddenly out in the cold snow, he galloped for hundreds of days after Robert, who was to help him rescue Harry's pistol from Towerwood.

So he was not surprised, late that night, when he heard Robert's voice outside in the farmyard.

"Because I could not stay away."

He heard Cecilia crying, too, in her room next door to his, before stranger and more horrible dreams came to him. He shouted for Cecilia, but it was Miss Gatly who came, looking very worried and very sorry for him.

Alex was ill for a long time. He knew next to nothing of what went on in the farm. He wanted to see Cecilia, but she was not allowed to see him—he gathered that Miss Gatly had words with Josiah about that, but Josiah won. Alex tossed in bed at night with dreams, dreams often full of Robert's voice and Cecilia crying.

Then, one evening, when Alex was at last getting better, there was an enormous din downstairs. Alex was woken up from a peaceful sleep by his father raging. Josiah was shouting. Alex could hear him throwing things. People were running about all over the house, calling out or shouting too. Whatever it was must have had something to do with Cecilia, because Alex heard Josiah raging at her. Cecilia was raging back, to Alex's horror. It was a row such as he had never heard before in all his knowledge of his father's rages. It was so terrible that Alex found himself getting out of bed, crying because he was so weak and ill, in order to stop it.

He got nearly to the door of his room, holding onto his bed and the wall. Then he had to rest before he went any further. While he rested the noise stopped—Miss Gatly was talking. He heard Cecilia run along the passage outside and slam the door of her room. Miss Gatly was still talking. She came along the passage too, calling out to Cecilia and back downstairs to Josiah.

"If he has another relapse you can blame yourself, Josiah Hornby, for your wicked unbelieving ways."

As she said that she came into Alex's room and was horrified to find him out of bed. She rattled him back between the sheets double-quick and plumped his pillows with much cap-shaking. "There, there, you shouldn't fret," she said, and, "It'll be just as I said, let him see."

Alex was trembling and shivering. "*Please,* what has happened?" he asked.

Miss Gatly stroked his forehead. "Nothing you need to worry about," she said. "Your father's seen a ghost, that's all. And, as I always told him, it is those that will not believe in the dead walking that get the biggest fright when they see with their own eyes. Now you try to get to sleep."

"But why did Cecilia—?"

"Ah, your father's in a strange state of mind these days. Everything is her fault, it seems. And I cannot see what your sister has to do with a ghost. I told your father so too. Now—not another word, Alex. Drink this and try to sleep."

Alex did sleep. After that the farm was quiet for a fortnight or more, while Alex slowly became stronger. He began to get up for most of the day and was allowed to sit in the parlour with a window open. He never saw Cecilia, not until the last day she was at home, and that made him very miserable. He found that she was to go to Switzerland almost at once, to stay for two years. Josiah was so kind to him that Alex was frightened and afraid Josiah thought he was going to die, but he went surly when Alex tried to mention Cecilia.

"That'll do," he would say.

Then, one day, he mentioned Cecilia himself. "She's off tomorrow," he said. "And good riddance to her. You can have your first outing to see her away if you want to. She wants you to. You can take the trap to the station with her if the weather holds fair."

"Thank you," said Alex, pleased and miserable at the same time.

Next morning, he met Cecilia in the farmyard, while John Britby was harnessing the pony. Josiah was not there. He had refused even to say goodbye to Cecilia.

Cecilia's eyes had tears in them. She looked very flushed and nervous, Alex thought, until she saw him picking his way through the mud. Then she ran and put her arms round him.

"Oh, Alex, I am so grateful you were allowed to come!"

She seemed almost a stranger already, much, much more beautiful than Alex had remembered her and much more grown-up. She had on a new dull-pink outfit, with roses to match on her bonnet, which Alex had not seen before: clothes, he supposed, newly made for Switzerland.

"Now you are here," Cecilia said, "perhaps we shall have time to talk at last. Are you strong enough to walk down the hill to the shore, while we wait for the trap?"

"Yes, of course," Alex said. "I went down there yesterday with Mary-Ann."

"Good," said Cecilia. She took off one small pink glove to search in little hanging bag, with roses onto match her bonnet. Alex saw her take five shillings out and hurriedly hand them to Old John. He grinned at her, winked at Alex, and tucked the money up in the pocket under his smock.

"Quarter of hour," he said. "That's the very slowest, miss. We'll miss your train beyond that."

"A quarter of an hour will do wonderfully," said Cecilia. Then she took Alex's hand and pulled him out of the farmyard and down the hill.

It was a truly beautiful day. The snow had gone while Alex was ill and, instead, there had been a month of mild, damp days. That day was almost like Spring. The sky was pale fresh blue and the wind was as warm and sweet-smelling as a wind in summer. There were snowdrops and crocuses on the sheltered parts of the hill where Alex and Cecilia walked, and in front of them the wet sands of the bay glittered in a way that made Alex joyful to look at them. He undid the scarf Miss Gatly had made him wear and trailed it in the wind as they crossed their own private railway-bridge and then the road. As they reached the big wet pebbles of the beach, the scarf fluttered like Lord Tremath's long flag had done.

Cecilia stopped on the beach and turned, very seriously, to Alex. "My dear," she said, "there have been a great many things I have been determined not to bother you with. I wanted you to get properly better, much as I wished to see you. I have tried—we have all tried—to make Father understand, but he will not." Alex saw she was biting her lip, trying not to cry. "I—I think," she said, "even so, I would have made one more effort. If I could have brought him here, we might have explained, with your help, but—" she dropped her one gloved hand towards the farmhouse—"he has refused even to say goodbye, and I shall have to grieve him terribly, because I think he *must* be a little fond of me. Tell him how grateful I was that he let me say goodbye to you, won't you, Alex?"

Alex watched her carefully putting on her other pink glove and felt frightened and suddenly lonely. "I do not understand," he said. There

was a ring on her finger that he had not seen before, with a ruby in it which Josiah could certainly not have bought for her even if he sold half the farmlands. "What are you going to do, Cecil?"

Cecilia laughed, but not in a way which made Alex feel better. "What the poor Helvetii did," she said. "Remember? I shall be wandering in Gairne when I should have been in Switzerland. Goodbye, Alex. Come and visit me when you can find an excuse. I shall be overjoyed to see you."

She turned round, towards the bay, and stepped off the pebbles onto the dark wet sand.

Alex stumbled after her. "Cecilia! What are you going to do?"

Cecilia turned round, with the wind billowing her dress and catching her hair from inside her bonnet. "Alex," she said, "you must not be upset. We are relying on you to comfort Father. As for what I am going to do, I thought you must have realised. I am going to be Countess of Gairne."

Alex had not a word to say. He felt as if the sky had turned dark grey and the sands black. All he could do was to watch Cecilia as she set out bravely across the bay for the third and last time, ploughing through the mud in her dainty new shoes as if she hardly knew where she treading. She was going diagonally across the bay, straight towards the quicksands. She was out of hearing when Alex shouted "Goodbye!" He sat down on the hard wet pebbles, so lonely and dreary, and still so weak from his illness, that he was in tears. He could hardly see Cecilia's tiny pink figure.

There were sounds behind him, as if someone were riding along the shore. Alex could not turn round, because of his tears.

Susannah said: "She is away, then. I did not think she would go, in the end."

Alex nodded, but he still could not turn round.

"Poor, poor Alex!" Susannah knelt beside him, with her arms round him. He realised that Harry was standing on the other side of him, carefully not looking at him, until he felt better.

"We came to see her off," Harry said. "The rest of us are at the station."

"Where," said Susannah, "they will have to wait a long time."

This idea amused Alex so much that he managed to smile at her, and then at Harry. "How—how do you know all about this?" he asked. Although he smiled, he felt forlorn and resentful, because no-one had told him anything.

"Through much coming and going," Susannah said cheerfully, "Harry and I have been to the island, you know. We saw it all. The castle is perfectly whole and twice the size of the one at Gairne."

"Is it?" Alex said and felt utterly left out. What friends they must be with Everard, he thought, to see all over the island.

Harry began to explain, perhaps because he saw how Alex was feeling. "Robert came to Arnforth," he said, "after he had tried to talk to your father. He asked for Cecilia's hand, you see, but your father seemed to think he was a ghost. I tried to talk to your father—and explain—but he simply lost his temper. He called me such things, Alex, that if he hadn't saved us all from beggary, I would have told my father."

"Saved you from beggary!" said Alex.

"Yes," said Susannah. "Without him, we would be sold up by now, it seems, but that does not make him any more likeable, to my mind. Oh, Alex! we did wish you were well and able to help! You are the only person whom your father would have listened to—and now it is too late."

Alex was surprised. He had never imagined he had the slightest influence with Josiah. He could not believe it. He looked out at Cecilia. She was now nearly halfway to the point where the river-channel crossed the hidden hardway. "Would I have been any use?" he said.

"Oh, yes," said Harry. "Everard sent for us to persuade us to talk to you, but Cecilia would not have you worried. She was afraid you would die if we pestered you with this, and Robert agreed with her."

"Oh!" said Alex.

"But," said Susannah, "we are relying on you now, because you will have to break it to your father. We do not think he will believe what has happened. We are afraid he will have to be told that Cecilia is drowned in the quicksands."

"No," said Alex. "I shall have to try to tell him the truth." He stood up, with his hands in his pockets, and looked out again at Cecilla. She was nearly at the channel, now. He was suddenly afraid that she really was going to be drowned. "Why did I not stop her?" he thought.

"Here he comes," said Harry, pointing over to the island

Alex looked over at the clump of bare trees. A horse came slowly down from among them as he looked. The sun caught the gold on its bridle, and brightened the rider's long orange cloak. It was certainly Robert. He was riding along the hardway at a pace which would bring him to Cecilla just as she reached the river.

Susannah said to Harry: "Give Alex Everard's letter to read while we wait."

Harry smiled. He took a little scroll from the front of his coat and handed it to Alex with a low courtly bow. "A letter from the Prince, my lord," he said, and laughed. "You are lucky to be such a friend of his, Alex."

The scroll was fastened with a big green seal. Alex, not used to the way of it, took some time to get it unfastened. He unrolled a glory of painted leopards, lions and fleurs-de-lis clustered at the head of the parch-

ment. Underneath, Everard's round, schoolboy's writing looked a little out of place, even though the letters were not written as Alex would write them. Everard wrote:

> To Alex Hornby greetings,
>
> I have given my consent to Robert's marriage with your sister. I hope you will stand in for your father and give yours, since you will break both their hearts by withholding it. And when you are better, you must send Harry Courcy to tell me when you are coming to the island. I want to meet you in state at the end of the causeway. You must read all our new laws, which I have drafted just as we planned them, and give me your opinion of them. I shall wait to issue them until you have seen them. Please hurry and recover.
>
> Everard, Princeps Insulae Terrae Transmarinaeque.

Alex smiled as he finished reading. A warmth, like one feels when one is very relieved, came over him and made him want to unbutton his coat.

"Everard was ill too," Susannah said, seeing he had finished the letter, "but nothing like as badly as you. You are neither of you to eat another icicle again as long as you live. I forbid it."

Alex laughed at her. He discovered he liked her dictating manner. Then they looked out into the bay. Robert had just reached Cecilia. He was bending down, and they could just make out that Cecilia was nodding.

"Now," said Harry, "you have to go to the farm, Alex. Susannah and I have to ride after her and arrive too late."

They went up the pebbles to the Courcys' horses. Before Susannah and Harry mounted, they all three looked out into the bay again. Cecilia was up in front of Robert, riding through the quicksands against the clear blue sky. They were waving, both of them, with wide happy sweeps of their arms. Alex, Harry and Susannah waved back, and Alex sighed.

nad and Dan adn Quaffy

She had struggled rather as a writer until she got her word processor. Or not exactly *struggled,* she thought, frowning at her screen and flipping the cursor back to correct *adn* to *and.* For some reason, she always garbled the word *and*—it was always *adn* or *nad; dna* or *nda* were less frequent, but all of them appeared far oftener than the right way. She had only started to make this mistake after she gave up her typewriter and she felt it was a small price to pay.

For years she had written what seemed to her the most stirring sort of novels, about lonely aliens among humans, or lonely humans among aliens, or sometimes both kinds lonely in an unkind world—all without ever quite hitting the response from readers she felt she was worth. Then came her divorce, which left her with custody of her son Daniel, then thirteen. That probably provided an impetus of some sort in itself, for Danny was probably the most critical boy alive.

"Mum!" he would say. "I wish you'd give *up* that lonely-heart alien stuff! Can't you write about something decent for a change?" Or, staring at her best efforts at cookery, he said, "I can't be expected to eat *this!*" After which, he had taken over cooking himself: they now lived on chilli con carne and stir-fry. For, as Danny said, "A man can't be expected to learn more than one dish a year." At the moment, being nearly fifteen, Danny was teaching himself curry. Their nice Highgate house reeked of burnt garam masala most of the time.

But the real impetus had come when she found Danny in her workroom sternly plaiting the letters of her old typewriter into metal braid. "I've had this old thing!" he said, when she tore him away with fury and cursings. "So have you. It's out of the ark. Now you'll have to get a word processor."

"But I don't know how to work the things!" she had wailed.

"That doesn't matter. I do. I'll work it for you," he replied inexorably. "And I'll tell you what one to buy too, or you'll only waste money."

He did so. The components were duly delivered and installed, and Daniel proceeded to instruct his mother in how to work as much of them

as—as he rather blightingly said—her feeble brain would hold. "There," he said. "Now write something worth reading for a change." And he left her sitting in front of it all.

When she thought about it, she was rather ashamed of the fact that her knowledge of the thing had not progressed one whit beyond those first instructions Danny had given her. She had to call on her son to work the print-out, to recall most of the files and to get her out of any but the most simple difficulty. On several occasions—as when Danny had been on a school trip to Paris or away with his school cricket team—she had had to tell her publisher all manner of lies to account for the fact that there would be no copy of anything until Danny got back. But the advantages far outweighed these difficulties—or at least she knew they did *now*.

That first day had been a nightmare. She had felt lost and foolish and weak. She had begun—not having anything else in mind—on another installment of lonely aliens. And everything kept going wrong. She had to call Danny in ten times in the first hour, and then ten times after lunch, and then again when, for some reason, the machine produced what she had written of Chapter I as a list, one word to a line. Even Danny took most of the rest of the day to sort out what she had done to get that. After that, he hovered over her solicitously, bringing her mugs of black coffee, until, somewhere around nine in the evening, she realised she was in double bondage, first to a machine and then to her own son.

"Go away!" she told him. "Out of my sight! I'm going to learn to do this for myself or die in the attempt!"

Danny gave her bared teeth a startled look, and fled.

By this time she had been sitting in front of board and screen for nearly ten hours. It seemed to her that her threat to die in the attempt was no idle one. She felt like death. Her back ached and so did her head. Her eyes felt like running blisters. She had cramp in both hands and one foot asleep. In addition, her mouth was foul with too much coffee and Danny's chilli con carne. The little green letters on the screen kept retreating behind the glass to the distant end of a long, long tunnel. "I *will* do this!" she told herself fiercely. "I am an intelligent adult—probably even a genius—and I will *not* be dominated by a mere machine!"

And she typed all over again:

> Chapter One
>
> The Captain had been at board and screen ever since jump—a total of ten hours. Her hands shook with weariness, making it an effort to hold them steady on her switches. Her head was muzzy, her mouth foul with

> nutrient concentrates. But since the mutiny, it was sit double watches or fail to bring the starship *Candida* safely through the intricate system of Meld...

At this point, she began to get a strange sense of power. She *was* dominating this damned machine, even though she was doing it only by exploiting her own sensations. Also, she was becoming interested in what might be going to happen to the starship *Candida*—not to speak of the reasons that had led up to the mutiny aboard her. She continued writing furiously until long after midnight. When she stopped at last, she had to pry her legs loose from her chair.

"*That's* more like it, Mum!" Danny said the next morning, reading it as it came from the printer.

He was, as usual, right. *Starship Candida* was the book that made the name of FC Stone. It won prizes. It sold in resorts and newsagents all over the world. It was—reviewers said—equally remarkable for its insight into the Captain's character as for the intricate personal relationships leading to the mutiny. Much was spoken about the tender and peculiar relationships between the sexes. This last made FC Stone grin rather. All she had done was to revenge herself on Danny by reversing the way things were between them. In the book, Captain was all-powerful and dominating and complained a lot about the food. The Mate had a hypnotically induced mindset that caused him to bleat for assistance at the first sign of trouble.

Her next book, *The Mutineers,* was an even greater success. For this one, FC Stone extended the intricate personal relationships to the wider field of galactic politics. She discovered she revelled in politics. Provided she was making the politics up herself, there seemed no limit to how intricate she could make them.

Since then she had, well, *not* stuck to a formula—she was much more artfully various than that—but, as she said and Danny agreed, there was no point in leaving a winning game. Though she did not go back to starship *Candida,* she stayed with that universe and its intricate politics. There were aliens in it too, which she always enjoyed. And she kept mostly out in space, so that she could continue to describe pilots astronauting at the controls of a word processor. Sooner or later in most of her books, someone, human or alien, would have sat long hours before a screen, until, dazed with staring, aching in the back, itching in the nose—for the burning of Asian spices in the kitchen tended to give her hay fever—and with cramped hands, this pilot would be forced to manoeuvre arduously through jump. This part always, or nearly always, got written when FC Stone was unable to resist staying up late to finish the chapter.

Danny continued to monitor his mother. He was proud of what he had made her do. In holidays and round the edges of school, he hung over her shoulder and brought her continual mugs of strong black coffee. This beverage began to appear in the books too. The mutineer humans drank *gav,* while their law-abiding enemies quaffed *chvi.* Spacer aliens staggered from their nav-couches to gulp down *kivay;* and the mystics of Meld used *xfy* to induce an altered state of consciousness—although this was not generally spotted as being the same substance. And it was all immensely popular.

It was all due to the word processor, she thought, giving the nearest component a friendly pat as she leant towards the screen again. The latest mug of cooling *kivay* sat beside her. Her nose was, as usual, tickled by burnt ginger or something. Her back was beginning to ache—or, more truthfully, her behind was. She ought to get a more comfortable chair, but she was too fond of this old one. Anyway, the latest book was the thing. For this one, she had at last gone back to starship *Candida.* There had been a lot of pressure from her fans. And her publisher thought there was enough material in their suggestions, combined with FC Stone's own ideas, to make a trilogy. So she had decided to start in the way she knew would get her going. She typed:

> Jump. Time nad the world stretched dna went out. Back. The Captain had sat at her boards for four objective days—four subjective minutes or four subjective centuries. Her head ached, gums adn all. She cursed. Hands trembling on controls, she struggled to get her fix on this system's star.

Now what had some vastly learned reader suggested about this system's star? It had some kind of variability, but that was all she could remember. Damn. All her notes for it were in that file Danny had set up for her. He was at school. But he had written down for her how to recall it. She fumbled around for his piece of paper—it had worked half-way under a black box whose name and function she never could learn—and took a swig of lukewarm *xfy* while she studied what to do. It looked quite simple. She took another sip of *gav.* Store the new book. Careful not to cancel this morning's work. There. Screen blank. Now type in this lot, followed by *Candida 2.* Then—

A clear childish voice spoke. "This is Candida Two, Candy," it said. "Candida One, I need your confirmation."

It was no voice FC Stone knew and it seemed to come from the screen. Her eyes turned to the mug of *kivay.* Perhaps she was in a state of altered consciousness.

"Candida One!" the voice said impatiently. "Confirm that you are conscious. I will wait ten seconds and then begin life-saving procedures. Ten, nine, eight..."

This sounded serious. Coffee poisoning, thought FC Stone. I shall change to carrot juice or cocoa.

"...seven, six, five," counted the childish voice, "four, three..."

I'd better say something, thought FC Stone. How absurd. Weakly she said, "Do stop counting. It makes me nervous."

"*Are* you Candida One?" demanded the voice. "The voice-pattern does not quite tally. Please say something else for comparison with my records."

Why should I? thought FC Stone. But it was fairly clear that if she stayed silent the voice would start counting again and then, presumably, flood the room with the antidote for *xfy*.

No, no, this was ridiculous. There was no way a word processor could flood anyone's system with anything. Come to that, there was no way it could speak either—or was there? She must ask Danny. She was just letting her awe of the machine, and her basic ignorance, get on top of her. Let us be rational here, she thought. If she was not suffering from *gav* poisoning, or if, alternatively, the smell of charred turmeric at present flooding the house did not prove to have hallucinogenic properties, then she had worked too long and hard imagining things and was now unable to tell fantasy from reality...unless...unless—what a *wonderful* thought!—Danny had, either for a joke or by accident, connected one of the black boxes to the radio and she was at this moment receiving its *Play for the Day*.

Her hand shot out to the radio beside her, which she kept for aural wallpaper during the duller part of her narratives, and switched it on. Click. *"During this period Beethoven was having to contend with his increasing deafness..."*

The childish voice cut in across this lecture. "This voice is not correct," it pronounced, putting paid to that theory. "It is the voice of a male. Males are forbidden access to any of my functions beyond basic navigational aids. Candida One, unless you reply confirming that you are present and conscious, I shall flood this ship with sedative gas ten seconds from now."

Then perhaps Danny has put a cassette in the radio as a joke, thought FC Stone. She turned off the radio and, for good measure, shook it. No, no cassette in there.

And the childish voice was at its counting again "...six, five, four..."

Finding that her mouth was hanging open, FC Stone used it. "I know this is a practical joke," she said. "I don't know what it is you've done, Danny, but my God I'll skin you when I get my hands on you!"

The countdown stopped. "Voice-patterns are beginning to match," came the pronouncement, "though I do not understand your statement. Are you quite well, Candy?"

Fortified by the knowledge that this had to be a joke of Danny's, FC Stone snapped, "Yes, of course I am!" Very few people knew that the C in FC Stone stood for Candida, and even fewer knew that she had, in her childhood, most shamingly been known as Candy. But Danny of course knew both these facts. "Stop this silly joke, Danny, and let me get back to work."

"Apologies," spoke the childish voice, "but who is Danny? There are only two humans on this ship. Is that statement addressed to the male servant beside you? He asks me to remind you that his name is Adny."

The joke was getting worse. Danny was having fun with her typos now. FC Stone was not sure she would ever forgive him for that. "And I suppose you're going to tell me we've just emerged in the Dna System and will be coming in to ladn at Nad," she said bitterly.

"Of course," said the voice.

FC Stone spent a moment in angry thought. Danny had to be using a program of some kind. She ought first to test this theory and then, if it was correct, find some way to disrupt the program and get some peace. "Give me your name," she said, "with visual confirmation."

"If you like," the voice responded. Had it sounded puzzled? Then Danny had thought of this. "I am Candida Two. I am your consciousness-class computer modelled on your own brain." It sounded quite prideful, saying this. But, thought FC Stone, a small boy co-opted by a grand fifteen-year-old like Danny *would* sound prideful. "We are aboard the astroship *Partlett* M32/A401."

Motorways, thought FC Stone, but where did he get the name?

"Visual," said the voice. Blocks of words jumped into the screen. They seemed to be in Russian? Greek? capitals.

It had to be a computer game of some kind, FC Stone thought. Now what would Danny least expect her to do? Easy. She plunged to the wall and turned the electricity off. Danny would not believe she would do that. He would think she was too much afraid of losing this morning's work—and maybe she would, but she could do it over again. As the blocks of print faded from the screen, she stumped off to the kitchen and made herself a cup of *xfi*—no, COFFEE!—and prowled around in there amid the smell of cauterised ginger while she drank it, with some idea of letting the system cool off thoroughly. She had a vague notion that this rendered a lost program even more lost. As far as she was concerned, this joke of Danny's couldn't be lost enough.

The trouble was that she was accustomed so to prowl whenever she was stuck in a sentence. As her annoyance faded, habit simply took over. Half-way through the mug of *quaffy,* she was already wondering whether to call the taste in the Captain's mouth merely *foul,* or to use something more specific like *chicken shit.* Five minutes later, FC Stone mechanically made herself a second mug of *chofiy*—almost as mechanically noting that this seemed to be a wholly new word for the stuff and absently constructing a new kind of alien to drink it—and carried it through to her workroom to resume her day's stint. With her mind by then wholly upon the new solar system just entered by the starship *Candida*—there was no need to do whatever-it-was the learned fan wanted: after all, neither of them had *been* there and *she* was writing this book, not him—she switched the electricity back on and sat down.

Neat blocks of Graeco-Cyrillic script jumped to her screen. "Candy!" said the childish voice. "Why don't you answer? I repeat. We are well inside the Dna System and coming up to jump."

FC Stone was startled enough to swallow a mouthful of scalding *c'phee* and barely notice what it was called. "Nonsense, Danny," she said, somewhat hoarsely. "Everyone knows you don't jump inside a solar system."

The script on the screen blinked a little. "His name is Adny," the voice said, sounding a little helpless. "If you do not remember that, nor that micro-jumps inside a system are possible, then I see I must attend to what he has been telling me. Candy, it is possible that you have been overtaken by senility—"

"Senility!" howled FC Stone. Many murderous fates for Danny crowded through her mind.

"—and your male has been imploring me to ask you to authorise his use of functions Five through Nine to preserve this ship. Will you so authorise? Some action is urgent."

A certain curiosity emerged through FC Stone's anger. How far was Danny prepared to take his joke? How many possibilities had he allowed for? "I authorise," she said carefully, "his use of functions Five through *Eight* only." And let's see if he planned for that! she thought.

It seemed he had. A symbol of some kind now filled the screen, a complex curlicue the like of which FC Stone had never seen, or imagined her equipment capable of producing. A wholly new voice spoke, male and vibrant. "I thank you," it said. "Function Eight will serve for now. This justifies my faith in you, Candida Three. I am now able to bypass the computer and talk to you direct. Please do not turn your power-source off again. We must talk."

It was a golden voice, the voice, perhaps, of an actor, a voice that made FC Stone want to curl up and purr and maybe put her hair straight, even while she was deciding there was no way Danny could have made his rough and squawky baritone sound like this. Gods! He must have hired someone! She gave that boy far too much money. She took another swig of *ogvai* while she noted that the voice was definitely in some way connected to the symbol on the screen. The curlicue jumped and wavered in time to its words.

"What do you mean by calling me Candida Three?" she asked coldly.

"Because you are the exact analogue of my mistress, Candida One," the golden voice replied. "Her ship's computer is known as Candida Two. It therefore followed that when I had searched the universes and discovered you, I came to think of you as Candida Three. I have been studying you—most respectfully, of course—through this machine you use and the thoughts you set down on it, for two years now, and—"

"And Daniel has been reading other books besides mine," FC Stone interrupted. "Unfaithful brat!"

"I beg your pardon?" The symbol on the screen gave an agitated jump.

Score one to me! FC Stone thought. "My son," she said. "And we're talking parallel universes here, I take it?"

"We are." The golden voice sounded both cautious and bemused. "Forgive me if I don't quite follow you. You take the same sudden leaps of mind as my mistress, though I have come to believe that your mind is far more open than hers. She was born to a high place in the Matriarchy and is now one of the most powerful members of the High Coven—"

"Coven!" said FC Stone. "Whose book is this out of?"

There was a pause. The curlicue gave several agitated jumps. Then the golden voice said, "Look, please let me explain. I'm delaying jump as long as I can, but there really is only a very narrow window before I have to go or abort."

He sounded very pleading. Or perhaps *beguiling* was a better word, FC Stone thought, for that kind of voice. "All right," she said. "Get on with the program. But just tell me first what you mean when you say *mistress,* Danny."

"Adny," he said. "My name is Adny."

"Adny, then," said FC Stone. "*Mistress* has two meanings."

"Why, I suppose I mean both," he answered. "I was sold to Candy as a child, the way all men are in this universe. Men have almost no rights in the Matriarchy and the Matriarchy is the chief power in our galaxy. I have been luckier than most, being sold to a mistress who is an adept of the High Coven. I have learnt from her—"

FC Stone gave a slight exasperated sigh. For a moment there, she had been uneasy. It had all seemed far more like a conversation than any program Danny could produce. But his actor-friend seemed to have got back to his lines now. She shot forth another question. "So where is your mistress now?"

"Beside me, unconscious," was the reply.

"Senile?" said FC Stone.

"Believe me, they are liable to it," he said. "The forces they handle do seem to damage them, and it does seem to overtake them oftenest when they're out in space. But—" she could hear the smile in his voice "—I must confess that I was responsible for this one. It took me years of study before I could outwit her, but I did it."

"Congratulations, Adny," said FC Stone. "What do you want me to do about it? You're asking me to help you in your male backlash, is that it?"

"Yes, but you need do almost nothing," he replied. "Since you are the counterpart of Candida One, the computer is accepting you already. If you wish to help me, all I need is your voice authorizing Candida Two to allow me functions Nine and Ten. I can then tap my mistress's full power and navigate the ship to my rendezvous, whereupon I will cut this connection and cease interrupting you in your work."

"*What!*" said FC Stone. "You mean I don't get to navigate a word processor?"

"I don't understand," said Adny.

"Then you'd better!" said FC Stone. She was surprised at how strongly she felt. "Listen, Danny or Adny, or whoever you are! My whole career, my entire *success* as a writer, has been founded on the fact that I *enjoy,* more than anything else, sitting in front of this screen and pretending it's the controls of a starship. I enjoy the dazed feeling, I like the exhaustion, I don't mind getting cramp, and I even like drinking myself sick on *ogvai!* The only reason I haven't turned the machine off again is the chance that you're going to let me do it for real—or what feels like for real, I don't care which—and I'm not going to let that chance slip. You let me pilot my WP and I'll even authorise you function Eleven afterwards, if there is such a thing. Is that clear?"

"It is very clear, Great Lady," he said. There was that in his tone that suggested he was very used to yielding to demanding women, but could there have been triumph in it too?

FC Stone was not sure of that tone, but she did not let it worry her. "Right," she said. "Brief me."

"Very well," he said, "though it may not be like you expect. We are about to make a micro-jump which, in the normal way, would bring us

out above the spaceport, but in this case is designed to bring us directly above the city of Nad and, hopefully, inside the Coven's defences there. Other ships of my conspiracy should be materialising too, hopefully at the same moment, so the jump must be made with utmost accuracy. I can broadcast you a simulacrum of *Partlett*'s controls, scaled down to correspond to your own keyboard. But you must depress the keys in exactly the order in which I highlight them. Can you do this?"

"Yes," said FC Stone. "But stop saying *hopefully* or I shan't grant you any functions at all. The word shouldn't be used like that and I detest sloppy English!"

"Yours to command," Adny said. She could hear the smile in his voice again. "Here are your controls."

The curlicue faded from the screen, to be replaced by a diagrammatic image of FC Stone's own keyboard. It was quite recognizable, except, to her dismay, an attempt had been made to repeat it three times over. The two outer representations of it were warped and blurred. "Gods!" said FC Stone. "How do I use this? There isn't room for it all."

"Hit HELP before you use the extra keys on the right and CAP before you use the ones on the left," Adny's voice reassured her. "Ready?"

She was. She took a hasty sip of cooling *qavv* to steady herself and hovered over her keyboard, prepared to enjoy herself as never before.

It was actually a bit of a let-down. Keys on her screen shone brighter green. Obedient to them, FC Stone found herself typing CAP A, d, HELP N and then HELP N, a, D. Some part of her mind suggested that this still looked like Danny's joke, while another part, more serious, suggested it might be overwork and perhaps she should see a doctor. But she refused to let either of these thoughts distract her and typed CAP D, n, HELP A in high excitement.

As she did so, she heard the computer's childish voice again. "Ready for jump. Candida One, are you sure of this? Your co-ordinates put us right on top of Nad, in considerable danger from our own defences."

"Reassure her," Adny's voice said urgently.

Without having to think, FC Stone said soothingly, "It's all right, Candida Two. We have to test those defences. Nad is under orders not to hurt us." And she thought, As to the manner born! I'd have made a good Matriarch!

"Understood," said the childish voice. "Jump as given, on the count of zero. Five, four, three"—FC Stone braced herself—"two, one, zero."

Did she feel a slight lurch? Was there a mild ripple of giddiness? She was almost sure not. A quick look round the workroom assured that all was as usual.

"Jumping," said Candida Two. "There will be an interval of five subjective minutes."

"Why?" said FC Stone, like a disappointed child.

Adny's voice cut in hastily. "Standard for a microjump. Don't make her suspicious!"

"But I don't *feel* anything!" FC Stone complained in a whisper.

The keyboards vanished from the screen. "Nobody does," said Adny. "Computer's out of the circuit now. You can speak freely. There is no particular sensation connected with jump, though disorientation does occur if you try to move about."

"Damn!" said FC Stone. "I shall have to revise all my books!" An acute need to visit the toilet down the passage came upon her. She picked up her mug of *chphy* reflexively, thought better of that, and put it down again. Her mind dwelt on that toilet, its bowl stained from Danny's attempt, some years ago, to concoct an elixir of life, and its chain replaced by a string of cow bells. To take her mind off it, she said, "Tell me what you mean to do when you and the other ships come out over Nad. Does this start a revolution?"

"It's rather more complicated than that," said Adny. "Out of the twelve Male Lodges, there are only six prepared to rebel. Two of the remaining six are neutral traditionally and supported in this by the Minor Covens; but the Minor Covens are disaffected enough to ally with the Danai, who are a helium life-form and present a danger to all of us. The four loyal Lodges are supposed to align with the Old Coven and on the whole they do, except for the Fifth Lodge, which has thrown in with the Midmost Coven, who are against everyone else. Their situation is complicated by their concessions to the Traders, who are largely independent, save for overtures they seem to have made to the Anders. The Anders—another life-form—have said they are *our* allies, but this flirting with the Traders makes us suspicious. So we decided on a bold ploy to test—"

"Stop!" said FC Stone. Much as she loved writing this kind of stuff, hearing someone talk like it made her head reel. "You mean, you've gone to all this trouble just for a test run?"

"It's more complicated than—" began Adny.

"No, I don't want to know!" said FC Stone. "Just tell me what happens if you fail."

"We can't fail," he replied. "If we do, the High Coven will crush the lot of us."

"Me too?" FC Stone enquired anxiously.

"Possibly," said Adny. "They may not realise how I did this, but if they do, you can probably stop them by destroying your machine."

"Never!" said FC Stone. "I'd rather suffer—or, better still, win!"

A bell rang. The keyboard reappeared, elongated and bent, in her screen. "Emerged over Nad," the computer said. "Candy! What is this? I count sixteen other ships emerged, two Trader, four Ander and the rest appear to be Matriarch. We jump back."

"Give me functions Nine and Ten!" Adny snapped.

"I authorise Adny—" said FC Stone.

"Oh, Candy!" the computer said reproachfully. "Why are you so good to that little creep? He's only a man."

"I authorise Adny in functions Nine and Ten," FC Stone almost shrieked. It was the only way she could think of to stop the most unpleasant sensations which were suddenly manifesting, mostly in her head and stomach. It was as if surf were breaking through her in bubbles of pain. A tearing-feeling across her shoulders made her think she was germinating claws there. And psychic attack or not, she knew she just had to get to that toilet.

"Acknowledged," the computer said glumly.

She leapt from her chair and ran. Behind her she heard claps of sound and booms that seemed to compress the air around her. Through them she heard Adny's voice issuing orders, but that was shortly overlaid by a high-pitched whistling, drilling through her ears even through the firmly shut toilet door.

But in the loo, adjusting her dress, a certain sanity was restored to FC Stone. She looked at her own face in the mirror. It was encouragingly square and solid and as usual—give or take a sort of wildness about the eyes—and it topped the usual rather overweight body in its usual comfortably shapeless sweater. She raked her fingers through the greying frizz of her hair, thinking as she did so that she would make a very poor showing beside Adny of the golden voice. The action brought away two handfuls of loose hair. As always, she was shedding hair after a heavy session at the word processor—a fact she was accustomed to transfer to her aliens, who frequently shed feathers or fur during jump. Things were quite normal. She had simply been overworking and let Danny's joke get to her.

Or perhaps it was charred chilli powder, she thought as she marched out into the passage again. Possibly due to its hallucinogenic nature, that damnable whistling was still going on, pure torture to her ears. Fom the midst of it, she could hear Adny's voice. "Nad Coven, do we have your surrender, or do we attack again?"

I've had enough! thought FC Stone. She marched to her desk, where the screen was showing Adny's curlicue, pulsing to the beat of the beastly shrilling. "Stop this noise!" she commanded. "And give me a picture of

Partlett's flight deck." If you *can,* she thought, feeling for the moment every inch the Captain of the starship *Candida.*

The whistling died to an almost bearable level. "I need function Eleven to give you vision," Adny said—irritably?—casually?—or was it *too* casually? He was certainly over-casual when he added, "It does exist, you know."

Give him what he wants and get rid of him, thought FC Stone. "I authorise function Eleven then," she said.

"*Oh!*" said the computer, like a hurt child.

And there was a picture on the screen, greenish and jumping and sleeting green lines, but fairly clear for all that. *Partlett*'s controls, FC Stone noted absently, had fewer screens than she expected—far fewer than she put in her books—but far more ranks of square buttons and far, far too many dials for comfort, all of it with a shabby, used look. But she was looking mostly at the woman who seemed to be asleep in the padded swivel seat in front of the controls. Mother-naked, FC Stone was slightly shocked to see, and not a mark or a wrinkle on her slender body, nor on her thin and piquant face. Abruptly FC Stone remembered being quite proud of her looks when she was seventeen, and this woman was herself at seventeen, only beyond even her most idealised memories. Immense regret suffused FC Stone.

The whistling, blessedly, stopped. "Candy is really the same age as you," Adny observed.

Her attention turned to him. His seat was humbler, a padded swivel stool. Sitting on it was a small man with a long, nervy face—the type of man who usually has tufts of hair growing in his ears and below his eyes, as if to make up for the fact that such men's hair always tends to be thin and fluffy on top. Adny's hair was noticeably thin on top, but he had smoothed and curled it to disguise the fact, and it was obvious that he had plucked and shaved all other hair fom his wrinkled little body—FC Stone had no doubt of this, since he was naked too. The contrast between his appearance and his voice was, to say the least of it, startling.

Adny saw her look and grinned rather ruefully as he leant forward to hold a paper cup under some kind of tap below the control panel. She realised he could see her too. The contrast between herself and the sleeping beauty beside him made her feel almost as rueful as he looked. "Can you give me a picture of Nad and any damage there?" she asked, still clinging to her role as Captain. It seemed the only way to keep any dignity.

"Certainly," he said, running his finger down a row of the square buttons.

She found herself apparently staring down at a small town of old houses built up against the side of a hot stony hill—red roofs, box-like

white houses, courtyards shaded with trees. It was quite like a town in Spain or Italy, except that the shapes of the walls and the slant of the roofs was subtly different and wrong. It was the very smallness of the difference between this and towns she knew which, oddly enough, convinced FC Stone for once and for all that this place was no fake. She really was looking at a real town in a real world somewhere else entirely. There was a smoking, slaggy crater near the market square, and another downhill below the town that had destroyed a road. She had glimpses of the other spaceships, drifting about looking rather like hot air balloons.

"Why is it such a small place?" she said.

"Because Nad is only a small outpost of the Matriarchy," Adny replied in his golden voice. The picture flipped back to show he had turned to face her on his stool, sipping steaming liquid from his paper cup. No doubt it was *kfa* or even *quphy.* He smiled through its steam in a way that must have beguiled the poor sleeping beauty repeatedly, and she found she was wishing he had turned out to be an alien instead. "I owe you great thanks on behalf of the Second Male Lodge," he said. "We now have the Nadlings where we want them. And since you have given me full control of this ship and access to all my ex-mistress's power, I can move on to the central worlds in strength and use her as a hostage there."

Hitler and Napoleon were both small men, FC Stone thought, with golden voices. It gave her a slight, cold *frisson* to think what she might have loosed on the unfortunate Matriarchy. "You gave me the impression that this *was* the central world," said FC Stone.

"Not in so many words," said Adny. "You don't think I'd be fool enough to move against the strength of the Matriarchy without getting hold of a conscious-class computer first, do you?"

FC Stone wished to say that, Yes, she did. People took that sort of desperate risk in her books all the time. It depressed her to find him such a cautious rebel. *And* he had cheated her, as well as his sleeping beauty—and no doubt he was all set to turn the whole works into a Patriarchy. It was a total waste of a morning.

Or was it? she wondered. A matriarchy where men were sold as slaves was right up her street. There was certainly a book in there. Perhaps she should simply be grateful and hope that Adny did not get too far.

"Tell me," she said, at which he looked up warily from his cup, "what is that stuff you're drinking? *Goffa? Xvay?*"

She was glad to see she had surprised him. "Only coffee," he said.

The Shape of the Narrative in *The Lord of the Rings*

When I say "narrative," I do not mean simply the plot. I mean considerably more. Plots and their shapes—the bare outlines of stories—were something I know Tolkien himself was interested in. When I was an undergraduate, I went to a course of lectures he gave on the subject—at least, I think that was the subject, because Tolkien was all but inaudible. He evidently hated lecturing, and I suspect he also hated giving his thoughts away. At any rate, he succeeded in reducing his substantial audience to myself and four others in two weeks. We stuck on, despite his efforts. He worked at it: when it did appear that we might be hearing what he said, it was his custom to turn round and address the blackboard. Dim inklings alone reached me of what he meant, but these were too fascinating to miss. He started with the simplest possible story: a man (prince or woodcutter) going on a journey. He then gave the journey an aim, and we found that the simple picaresque plot had developed into a quest-story. I am not quite sure what happened then, but I know that by the end he was discussing the peculiar adaptation of the quest-story which Chaucer made in his "Pardoner's Tale."

As you see, Tolkien did not give away half of what he knew, even about plots, and I suspect he never talked about narrative at all, but it is clear from *The Lord of the Rings* that he knew all about narrative as well. The plot of *The Lord of the Rings* is, on the face of it, exactly the same simple one that he appeared to describe in his lectures: a journey that acquires an aim and develops into a kind of quest. But the bare plot is to any writer no more than the main theme of a sort of symphony which requires other themes added to it and the whole orchestrated into a narrative. To shape a narrative, you have to phase the various incidents and so control their nature that you set up significances, correspondences, foretastes and expectations, until your finished story becomes something else again from its simple outline. Tolkien does this orchestrating supremely well: so much so that, by various narrative sleights-of-hand, he almost reverses the normal flow of a quest-story, or at least makes an adaptation of it every bit as peculiar as the one he described in his lectures, and no-

body ever notices. It continues to fool me even now, though I think I can see what he is up to.

The Lord of the Rings is organized in movements, just like a symphony, but with this difference: each movement has an extension, or coda, which reflects partly back on the movement just completed, and partly forwards to what is to come. This coda is highly characteristic of Tolkien's method, and it becomes increasingly important as the narrative proceeds. You always have to watch what happens in these codas. And yet they, and the movements which precede them, in no way interfere with the story, the actual events being described, which appears to march steadily forward and to unfold with the utmost clarity and regularity. This limpid tale of events is one of Tolkien's major achievements, when you consider all the other things he was doing too. However, one thing he was *not* doing was striving to put it all in elegant language. His manner is at all times prolix and a little threadbare. The most he will do is to attempt a rough appropriateness. When he is dealing with hobbits, he is chatty and a little arch: "If Frodo had really wanted to write a book and had had many ears, he would have learned enough for several chapters in a few minutes" (I, 167). In more awesome places. he uses a hackneyed high style: "Then his wrath blazed in a consuming flame, but his fear rose like a vast black smoke to choke him" (III, 223). It is symptomatic, I think, that he at all times overworks the word "suddenly." To take the most random sample: "Suddenly he knew in his heart..." (I, 225); "Suddenly the lights went out" (II, 197); "Suddenly the silence was broken" (III, 127). As I know well enough myself, "suddenly" is a word hard to avoid in this kind of narrative. For Tolkien, as D. S. Brewer points out (*J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller, Essays in Memoriam,* ed. Salu and Farrell), was writing a Romance in the old sense of the word. A Romance, unlike a novel, does not aim to draw attention to the way it is written. Tolkien was far more concerned with the matter of his narrative than its manner, and he only exercised his undoubted gift for language in inventing names, particularly names of places—which is again exactly in the tradition of a Romance. I always wish that Tolkien's many imitators would notice how comparatively modest his language is, and not insist on writing their stuff in translationese.

The first movement of the narrative lasts until the flight from Bree. Here, along with the chatty manner, we are in a cozy hobbit world not very far removed from that of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Hobbits have that prosaic fubsiness one associates with a certain kind of children's story. And they are agreeably greedy and, above all, secure. But there is more to it than that. Throughout this section, Tolkien, like Lewis Carroll before him, is drawing heavily on the landscape round Oxford where he

lived. Just as, I am sure, the chessboard view of three counties from White Horse Hill suggested *Alice Through the Looking Glass,* it surely also gave rise to the Shire. But Tolkien took a leaf out of William Morris's book too, *The Well at the World's End,* and drew on the whole Upper Thames Valley. Here there are stuffy willow-choked flats, Wychwood, rivers like the Windrush and the Evenlode, the Rollright Stones, the long barrow called Wayland's Smithy, ploughland and orchards round Didcot, the Seven Barrows, Thames water meadows, and the austere landscape of the chalk downs. And he used them all: there is even a real place called Buckland. Three other things he did not use here, though they are immensely important in the rest of the book, are the Thames itself; the old prehistoric road called the Ridgeway, which is probably the oldest road in Britain, leading from east to west (like the way to the Grey Havens), sometimes as a cart-track, sometimes as broad as a motorway, and at other times vanishing in a valley; and finally a strange Oxford phenomenon, whereby the streets of the town are at times filled with a scent of distant flowers, for hours on end, as if one were smelling Heaven somehow. This is in a manner setting a thief to catch a thief, since I lived in Oxford for many years too and tend to use these things as well, but it is not important to know about them. I only draw attention to them to point out this first of Tolkien's narrative sleights-of-hand: by writing of things which were home to him, he contrives to give the reader a sense of home and security too.

But he is about to do something much more complicated than Carroll or Morris. He opens with a party. A burst of fireworks and fun. And here at once he surreptitiously introduces three major themes. The first, and by far the most important for the rest of the book, is the pressure of events which have happened long before the story opens. Later, this pressure comes from the far-off heroic past; but here it is underplayed, deftly, and seems merely to be a hangover from Bilbo's former mad journey. Which of course brought the Ring into Bilbo's possession. The Ring, whatever else it does, always brings the tragic past into the present. But at this stage Gandalf, in a pedagogic way in keeping with the homely tone, simply makes Bilbo give the Ring to Frodo and retire into the past himself.

But make no mistake. Undertones of the heroic and of the chivalry of Medieval Romances are being firmly introduced too, in the other two themes. One of these is the Quest itself. Because of the beguiling domesticity of the Shire and Tolkien's manner at this point, you are lulled into thinking of it in fairy-story terms: the hero journeys to a confrontation and receives supernatural help on the way. Of course the hero wins. And yet it starts with a party, like the best-known of all high Romances, the stories of King Arthur. A Quest nearly always begins with the King feast-

ing in Camelot. Enter a damsel or a churl demanding a boon. In this case Gandalf, and the quest is delayed, but the pattern is there. And you should remember that, though a lot of Quests, like that of Sir Gareth, prove the hero a man, a great many, like Gawain's with the Green Knight or that of the Grail, do no such thing. Furthermore, the title of the most famous collection of Arthurian Romances, Malory's, is *The Death of Arthur.* In fact, You Have Been Warned—although you need only feel a little uneasy at the moment.

For his third theme, Tolkien also drew on Romances. The poet of *Gawain and the Green Knight* calls King Arthur "sumquat childgered"—i.e., rather boyish. Froissart too regards this as the most chivalrous aspect of real knights (and so did Kipling later). Sir Percival is traditionally naïve to childishness. And so are the hobbits who set out on their journey. So you have a notion here which at once reinforces the prevailing nursery tale atmosphere and contradicts it: it is cosy, but it is also heroic.

It seems reasonable to mention these things because it is quite certain that Tolkien had them at his fingertips. The marvel is that he was capable of handling them, just as he did with the Oxford landscape, so that it is not necessary for the reader to know them in order to get the message. The message is a fourth theme, also thoroughly traditional, which these three come together to suggest: people have gone downhill from the heroic days. Now it is ordinary people who have to cope as best they can.

So Bilbo plays his practical joke and vanishes. Frodo lingers, even after Gandalf has reappeared and introduced seriously for the first time the deep notes of the distant past. It is typical of this movement that the history is hobbit-orientated, and concerns Gollum as much as Sauron and Isildur. Frodo, with what we are meant to consider dramatic irony, repudiates Gollum. The lingering ensures that, as Frodo and his companions set off, autumn is coming on, with all that can imply. We are meant to take the point that local changes of season are cosmic in origin, but attention is on the domestic landscape through which the hobbits journey. This is so solidly persuasive that Tolkien is able to introduce the Ringwraiths with the lightest of touches. A few words, and they are spinechilling. A black figure *sniffing* for you. They are childhood nightmares and gaps in the order of things, just with that.

Then a new theme enters, as the Elves intervene in their remote way. Their songs are of departed glories, which are still, it seems, things to conjure with. It is the past-history theme again, but it has a powerful woodwind nostalgia. It begins—just—to suggest that the coming autumn is a season of Middle-earth, not only of the year. But the scene is still so firmly local, that all you get at this stage is a sense of yearning, both for the past and for the Sea-crossing of the future. The present is detached

from the Elves. The story has begun to spread a little in time, and a little in space too.

Anyway, we are briskly back again to the domestic, with the matter of the mushrooms and the adventure-story excitement of the river-crossing and the escape through the Hedge. The hobbits muddle through, until they get into real trouble with the sinister Forest. This too is wonderfully spine-chilling by reason of being only just removed from a real wood. Even Old Man Willow is solidly a real willow tree. And once again they need rescuing, this time by Tom Bombadil. By now, it looks as if the fairy-story pattern, of travellers being saved from their own errors by supernatural intervention, is here to stay.

I find Tom Bombadil supremely irritating myself. I am well aware that he is a chthonic figure seen from, as it were, knee high, and I can see his presence here is important, standing as he does between earth and sky in the first truly open country, but I am always glad when he is dismissed by Elrond. It is a relief to have him distanced with high-sounding names as Iarwain, Forn and Orald. As Bombadil he is perverse and whimsical. He is the quintessence of the nursery story gone wrong, as it does from then on. Tolkien was quite right to put him in, but I wish he hadn't. He was quite right because here, in the haunting country of the Barrows—which was still domestic to Tolkien, though not perhaps to his readers—dead history, with all its wasted heroism and lingering evil, literally comes up and grabs the hobbits. The Barrow Wights, however, are not strictly this: they are spiteful ghosts. All the same, this is where Tolkien does, briefly, confront you with the scale of his narrative. Tom is near eternal. The bones in the Barrows are so old their deeds have been forgotten. The present is represented by the hobbits, apparently neither very noble nor very effectual. Around them the landscape first opens, then closes to lead them to death's door, and from the dead they acquire a knife that will be important later. It is a notable piece of foreshadowing, which ends in their rescue by Tom.

This is really the last time they are rescued in this way. That comforting pattern, and the movement, ends with their doings at Bree, which is, not insignificantly, a town half of men and half of hobbits. Men are now going to enter into the picture. The nursery tales, despite the cosy inn scene, are done with. And—this is an example of Tolkien's ability to use surreptitious themes from elsewhere—Frodo, like Adam and Eve and all the failures of fairy stories, has come there under a prohibition: not to put on the Ring. Which he proceeds to disobey. The fact that he puts the Ring on while singing a nursery rhyme only underlines the fact that such things are now inappropriate. And the movement ends with the same thing as it began.

The coda to this movement is very short but packed out with adumbrations: a journey of hardship over a desolate landscape, towards a hill topped with fires. While purporting simply to carry on the story, this section does all manner of things. It spreads the narrative considerably in space, and in time too. The past reappears in two forms, first as the petrified trolls, harking back to Bilbo's adventures, and then, far more potently, as the Black Riders. It now becomes clear that the Ringwraiths are not simply terrifying, but that they can harm the living. That they could win. We should remember here that Bilbo's victory over the trolls had been almost by luck. Frodo is almost not lucky. And, when they race to the Ford and it appears that even an Elf-lord has limited powers, your doubts increase, although you still hope for the supernatural rescue that the main movement has led you to expect. It comes, after a fashion, in the confusion at the Ford. This confusion, considering Tolkien's ability everywhere else to present landscapes and events with total clarity, must be deliberate. It must look forward to the profusion of doubtful events to follow. I do not think it comes off at all, but it does provide a wonderful introit to the ordered peace and measured debate of the next movement.

Rivendell is the Last Homely House of *The Hobbit*. But of course it is no such thing. It is under threat from Mordor. You realize this and cast your mind back, uneasily trying to find somewhere that *is* safe and homely. Bree? Tom Bombadil—no, not even him. And the Ringwraiths were in the Shire too. Even before the debate begins, you become aware that the only defence can be some form of attack. But this is not for Frodo to decide: he has reached his limited objective. The narrative stops short and reassembles itself by means of the debate.

Tolkien performs several remarkable narrative feats here. One is of course the retrospective doubts cast back on the earlier illusion of security. But the one which amazes me most is the fact that the debate is not in the least boring. It could be. Milton, in a similar situation, almost is. But there are so many questions by now raised that need answers, and so many new people to present—Gimli, Legolas, Boromir, Strider in his new role as Aragorn, Elrond revealed as truly half Elf, Gandalf acquiring new stature, and news of Gollum's escape—that I find my attention truly riveted. For the first time, the major themes enter undisguised, and you are made aware not only of the depths of past history, but of the huge spread of the land affected by it. You are shown a divided kingdom now reduced to a few outposts, once again threatened and likely this time to dwindle away. Elves, dwarves, men and hobbits are all likely to go down with it. A solution is propounded: destroy the Ring.

And this is the other amazing feat of narrative: you are told, this early on, exactly what is going to happen. And you are still in doubt that

it will. Each of the Fellowship of the Ring says exactly what his intentions are, and yet you do not believe they will do as they say. Each time I read it, I am still pained and shocked when the Fellowship divides later on. I am still in doubt that the Ring will be destroyed, or what good it would do if it was. It seems to me to need some explaining how Tolkien got away with it.

The main answer, I think, is the depth and variety of the history he invokes in the course of this movement. I suppose it is a commonplace that he took over the idea of the inset histories and legends from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf,* in which each inset vaguely echoes the action in the poem's present and each is progressively more doom-laden, but I am not sure if it is realised how thoroughly Tolkien adapted the notion to his own purposes. *Beowulf* uses the things purely for atmosphere. Tolkien uses his histories that way too, but only secondarily. His primary use for history is as a motive power, pushing his present-day characters into certain actions, to bring about the future. He presents us with triple measure: Elven history, mostly as hints and songs, immeasurably old and indicating the Elves are a dying race; that of men and dwarves, both of whom have more than once flourished heroically and then been decimated by the power of Sauron; and hobbits, who have existence rather than history. All are united by the rings and against the Ring. Thanks to the Elves, there is a huge timespan here, showing a continuous falling-off. Elrond says, "I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories" (I, 256). The effect of this, on top of the first movement's suggestion that only ordinary folk are left to cope, is to present the Fellowship, once formed, as a thread-thin company. It is as narrow in numbers and space as the present moment is in time. Against the past weight of failure, its only hope seems to be to hang together.

If this picks up and amplifies the earlier suggestions in the Shire that the present is small and ordinary, so does the nature of the Quest, now properly revealed. It is to be a negative one, a raid to destroy the enemy's inmost defences. It can only be made by beings so insignificant that the chances of success are minimal. It is destructive. It does not suggest renewal. Or does it? I have heard *The Lord of the Rings* stigmatized as simply a Goodies v. Baddies story. Insofar as this is true, it is of course a very modern story. Romances, fairy tales and even *Beowulf* do not have Baddies the way we do, the way Sauron is. But it is more original than it is modern, now that Tolkien has shown his hand, because it is really about people in time. It concerns the present, fully conscious of the past, injured by it in fact, pressing forward to make the unformed future. And of course the present is very small compared with both: mere instants. Tolkien makes the outcome dubious, if not equivocal, by having his Fellowship

set off in winter—a time of ill omen, of traditional heroism, and of hope too, since spring is to follow—and then by cunningly organising his narrative in its later stages, so that the issue is continually in doubt, just as the future always is.

The coda to this movement is, very characteristically, the start of the journey. Through more of Tolkien's meticulously visualised country, the Fellowship sets out. There is a strong sense that this is the nitty-gritty, the real stuff, because the landscape is now harsh and strange and because the proper Quest has been determined. In fact, not insignificantly, this is only partly true. This section serves mainly to lead into the next movement, which is a double one, bringing us hard up against endurance of two kinds.

First comes the achievement of the dwarves, heralded by the entry into Moria. The finding and opening of the gate is pure magic. I wish I could have written it. But once they get inside, I am never as impressed as I could wish. True, we have majestic evidence of dwarves' industry, and proof that their legends at least did not lie—and this tacitly reinforces the rest of the histories we have been given—so that when we come upon the long dead dwarves, it should strike us cold as evidence of the latest heroic failure. But I never find it does. I just feel the easy regret one feels on being told someone one didn't know had died. I suspect that Tolkien has here slipped over into the Goodies v. Baddies, adventure-story-mode. The Orcs, when they appear, do not have personalities as they do in Volume II. They are just the enemy. And then, sudden and shocking, comes the demise of Gandalf. Tolkien must have meant it to be so. I am sure he wanted to impress us with the fact that there is always the unforeseen disaster, and I am sure too that he wanted an ominous foreshadowing of the Lair of Shelob and the Paths of the Dead, but it won't do all the same. Who or what is the sudden Balrog? Up it pops, and down it goes again, taking Gandalf with it. For all that, the sense of loss is real, and leads in admirably to the second part of the movement, the sojourn in Lorien.

Oh good, you think, we are at last going to plumb the mysteries of the Elves! Legolas has been there for some time now, hinting at these mysteries, and yet, since he is one of the Fellowship, kidding you that Elves can be human and approachable. This is not the case. Tolkien lets you see much, but still leaves the Elves almost as mysterious and alien as they were before you saw it. They are genuinely not human. Their concerns seem other, even when they help. The reason seems to be their intense, abiding melancholy. The nostalgia shown earlier by the Elves in the Shire, and then, in a more restrained way, by Elrond, swells here into a huge woodwind theme. The Elves are dwindling, we are told. The dwarves awakened evil and forced many Elves over the Sea. This could be

the explanation, but it is not really. You get the real reason by hints, which you pick up mostly subconsciously: the Elves, by reason of their apparent immortality, are widowed from history. They are forced back on their own, which is merely living memory, unimaginably long. Tolkien conveys quietly, without ever quite centering your sights on it, the immense burden immortality would be. He uses women to do it: the Morning Star, Arwen Evening Star, and Galadriel herself. I daresay Women's Lib could make destructive points here, but it is entirely appropriate in a Romance, in which women are traditionally mysterious and a little passive. He is drawing on all the stories of Elf women loving mortal men, and quietly pointing up the concealed consequences: when the lover dies, the immortal woman grieves for ever. Women are generally more often widowed than men. But this stands for the situation of all the Elves. When they enter the temporary brawls of history, they pay for it by having to endure its horrors for ever. So they are forced for the most part to stay withdrawn among their yellow trees, never dying, but never quite coming to maturity either. The yellow trees vividly express their state. Are mallorns the yellow of spring, or autumn? Both, but not summer or winter. I find them profoundly saddening.

The Elves have wisdom, by a sort of natural compensation, but this can be an equal burden. Galadriel does, in her aloof way, enter history, but she has to do it in full knowledge that she is helping to end the Third Age of the world. You come away from Lothlorien with two pieces of hidden knowledge: a sense of a doomed age, and the fact that every gift exacts its price—sometimes a terrible one.

By now you should be well aware that putting on the Ring exacts its price. This is what happens to end the coda to this movement, just as it ended the coda to the first movement. It has become a pattern now: another stage in the journey, down the Anduin this time, ending in Frodo putting on the Ring again. Because of the pattern, you are half expecting another last-minute rescue. So it comes as a real shock when this does not happen, and the Fellowship breaks up. Lothlorien fools us to some extent, by appearing to awe and tame Boromir—though it is never *said* that it has—and the great river fools us too. The Fellowship appears to be sliding united along its current to a single end. But you always have to watch Tolkien with water. He never uses it unmeaningfully. Pools and lakes mirror stars, and hold hidden things. The previous river crossings have both been crucial. This Anduin has contrasting banks and, moreover, reeks of history. In a way, it *is* history, and the Fellowship is going with its current, to break up in confusion at the falls of Rauros. It is worth pointing out that when Aragorn later uses the same river, he comes *up* it, against the current, changing a course of events that seems inevitable.

The other water is of course the Sea. This has been sounding dimly in our ears throughout the book, but in Lothlorien it begins to thunder. Does it suggest loss, departure and death? Certainly. But since water is always life to Tolkien, it must also be eternity. Eternity, we must not forget, is by its nature both all time and no time at all. It is quite a feat to invoke the Sea so far inland. The effect is to end the movement with two symbols: a line of scattered figures with the ocean at their backs, confronting the ringed Eye of Sauron. The Eye, which also comes out into the open in Lothlorien, is an absolutely spine-chilling expression of evil—the more so because we never see more of the enemy than that. But it is possible to see the Eye, among its various significances, as the eye of the storm, the self-contained here-and-now, which the present has to pass through before it becomes the future.

Volume II inaugurates what might be called the great choral movement. The scene widens enormously and the numbers of both enemies and friends suddenly multiply by hundreds. The scale of the story, which Tolkien has unobtrusively been preparing us for, is now shown to be immense. It also involves a fiendishly difficult piece of double and treble narration. I know from bitter experience how difficult it is, when your narrative divides into two or more and both parts happen simultaneously, to decide which part to tell when. But Tolkien's narrative makes it more difficult still, because Frodo's part of the story is plotted to run counter to Merry and Pippin's, to narrow where theirs expands, to flow uphill as it were from the main course of events, so that not only does their Quest seem bound to fail, but you are in doubt as to whether this is what the narrative is really about.

If Tolkien agonized at all about how to do it, it does not show. He solved it characteristically by adopting a pattern: he will tell the positive side first, and the negative second. So he succeeds, apparently carelessly and prolifically, in flinging a huge double and treble twist of narrative across a huge area of land. He fools us a bit, of course, as usual. He represents the destruction of the Ring throughout as the thing of real importance, whereas it is only half of it. The act of destruction must be accompanied by the act of creation—in this case the mustering of allies to Minas Tirith to found a new Gondor. But he represents that as a desperate rearguard action. Indeed, some of his point is that such desperate defences are unintentionally regenerative. But, from the mere fact of devoting half his narrative to it, he gives away its importance.

First, however, he devotes himself to the Ents, to the Riders of Rohan and to Saruman. The first and last of these have been so firmly foreshadowed in earlier parts of the narrative that one receives them almost with recognition, like a theme emerging from the orchestra, or prophecies fulfilled. Rohan, though it has been mentioned, is like a new theme entirely—

which is as it should be. Against all three, the power of Mordor is slowly defined as the true great evil. I do not think that it could have been suggested so strongly in any better way. Mordor is never actually present, but always there in the searching Eye.

Orcs, on the other hand, representing Mordor and Isengard, are very much there, in numbers, splendidly solid: "his aching head was grated by the filthy jowl and hairy ear... Immediately in front were bowed backs and tough thick legs going up and down, up and down, unresting, as if they were made of wire and horn" (II, 55). And I think it a stroke of genius to have the Elvish for Orc be *Yrch,* like an expression of disgust in itself. These Orcs serve the double purpose of presenting the might of Mordor and Isengard and of getting Merry and Pippin to Fangorn—I do like things to pull their weight. Here are the Ents. I remember reading a review of *The Two Towers* when it first came out, in which the reviewer could not take the Ents. Walking trees! He indignantly concluded Tolkien was trying to foist a children's story on him as serious literature. He was not far wrong in a way. Here in Fangorn, Tolkien is echoing the Forest outside the Shire. He is also echoing the childish innocence of the first movement, deliberately and with a difference. Treebeard and his fellows are innocents. I am always impressed by how simply and completely Tolkien expresses this innocence. Like Mordor, Treebeard has eyes.

> These deep eyes were now surveying them, slow and solemn, but very penetrating. They were brown shot with a green light. Often afterwards Pippin tried to describe his first impression of them. "One felt as if there was an enormous well behind them, filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present..." (II, 66)

As I said, take note when Tolkien talks of water. The well of the past contains truth, but it stops short at the present. In this, it is like the hobbits of the Shire, but unlike the Elves, whose pools reflect stars. The Ents, however, unlike Hobbits, who are pragmatic and capable of growth, are grown up and complete as they are. They are hard to budge towards the future. It is a measure of the seriousness of the situation that the Ents are actually persuaded to move, and even then they only move against the lesser evil of Saruman. They are one of the things which will not survive long in a new Age. You are meant to feel, and you do, that it is a pity: they embody the mature innocence of the Third Age. But you have to look for real help to the Riders of Rohan, the comparative newcomers, who have yet to make history.

Rohan and its grassy plains have been foreshadowed too, in a way, in the Barrow Downs, so that new theme when it emerges seems entirely in keeping. But here, instead of Tom Bombadil between grass and sky, it is Gandalf who suddenly reappears, with something of the same force. This too is not unheralded, both by Galadriel's Mirror and by the previous pattern of the narrative. Gandalf disappears: sooner or later after that, the Ring is used: sooner or later, after that again, Gandalf reappears, a spearhead for the allies, just as the Ringwraiths are for Mordor. Gandalf's coming to Rohan ought to make one certain that Frodo will put on the Ring again in Mordor.

The Rohirrim are purely Anglo-Saxon. Tolkien lifted them entirely from his study of Old English—even their horses, I suspect, come from the legendary first Saxons in Britain, Hengist and Horsa. They have the Old English heroic culture complete. Tolkien does a delicate job here of differentiating them from Aragorn, who is at once both rougher and more sophisticated, coming as he does from a far older culture. For, as I said, these are a people without a past to whom we should look for the future. If you doubt this, you should contrast the passive roles of the Elf-women with that of Eowyn and the active part she plays, albeit disobediently. But before the Riders can do anything, they have to put their own house in order. Theoden King has to cast off evil counsel and the weight of age, and then to fight in Helm's Deep—all of which involves such bewildering coming and going that I always have twinges of incredulity about the stamina of Shadowfax. I also have twinges of doubt, as I am sure you are intended to, about the reliability of Rohan, despite their nobility. I go very Welsh, and when the men of Minas Tirith later say "Rohan will not come," I shake my head and mutter about perfidious Albion. Tolkien, as a Welsh scholar, may have had this reaction of mine in mind too. Certainly he is once again performing one of his sleights-of-narrative: for the thing at the back of his mind must certainly have been the way the Saxon King Harold had to march North to fight one invasion force in 1066, before rushing South again to fight the Normans, who were the real threat. Again, there is no need for the reader to know this. It comes over very clearly that the Rohirrim are having difficulty disentangling themselves from their own pressing present. Quite early on, you are asking, Can they do it in time to be of use to the future?

Parallel to this in time at least, Frodo and Sam and the noxious Gollum are creeping towards Mordor. This is the section foreshadowed in the coda to the first movement, but the landscape is now far more luridly depressing. Vividly in tune with the negative nature of their Quest are the marsh pools containing images of dead people. Again, watch Tolkien with water. What is history now? Similarly, the only virtues they

can exercise are negative: endurance, and forbearance towards Gollum. Everything is sterile, for all their heroism. Tolkien begins asserting their heroism from here on, and it obviously exists, like the positive love between Frodo and Sam, but the negatives are so overwhelming that you sense impending failure.

Therefore you feel relief as well as surprise when they run into Faramir and his guerrillas. It is like coming out into the sun. Tolkien does wonders of suggestion here: the landscape is meticulously Southern and the ferns are brown with winter, but the herbs Sam uses to cook with are all evergreen, and so is the cedar he makes his fire with. This has to be deliberate. About the same time, the others are meeting the futureless Ents and the pastless Rohirrim: Frodo and Sam meet those who have a long past but also obvious potential for the future. But notice that, when Tolkien typically reinforces his point with water, that Frodo and Faramir are both behind the waterfall at the time when they spare Gollum in the pool. But at the time you ignore that hint and realise simply that here is hope, and a potent force for good. You discover that Mordor has yet spread only patchily in Ithilien.

Be that as it may, as the others make their successful onslaught on Isengard, Frodo and Sam also attack a tower, by way of Cirith Ungol and Shelob. This section has been heavily foreshadowed in the Barrows and the mines of Moria, with their unavailing heroisms, and the weight of that makes this one more horrible. It is horrible enough on its own. The indecisions of Sam make it worse. And finally, despite Sting, and Galadriel's aid, while the other hobbits triumph in Isengard, Frodo is taken prisoner, an exact reversal of their respective positions at the beginning of the movement. This reversing is part of the deliberate counterplotting of this whole section.

And now we turn to the marvellous city of Minas Tirith, in nearly the final swatch in the plaiting of this huge penultimate movement. We already admire the place because of Faramir, with whom, in a brief episode, Tolkien has succeeded in dissipating the impression left by Boromir. It adds to the sense of marvel that Minas Tirith is not degenerate and cynical after all. The city has been kept before us one way or another since the Council of Elrond, so that, along with the surprise when we come to it at last, there is a sense of familiarity, as of a hidden theme related to all the others finally emerging from the orchestra. Something of it has been suggested too in the episode back in the Shire when Fatty Bolger is left alone to deal with the Black Riders, and the hobbits sound their alarm. We are told that the horn "rent the night like fire on a hilltop. AWAKE!" (I, 188). And again in II when the watchfires of Rohan surround the Orcs. Now the beacon fires spring alight round the city as Pippin rides up with

Gandalf. The effect is to give Minas Tirith distinctly Christian associations—and why not, since Tolkien has used everything else in our heritage?—because you think at once of "Christians awake!" and that bit of a hymn "How gleam thy watchfires through the night," which not only adds to the stature of the city, but, as we shall see, casts a little Christianity on Frodo and Sam too.

But it would be daft to see Minas Tirith as Jerusalem, bravely fronting evil. It owes far, far more to the doomed city of Atlantis. With it, Tolkien is working another sleight-of-narrative. Atlantis was very old, wonderfully civilised and built in a series of terrace-like rings. And it was inundated, before the dawn of history. By deliberately using and knowing that he was using Atlantis as a model, Tolkien again ensures that the reader gets the message without needing to know: Minas Tirith is doomed. And, as the muster of Mordor proceeds, you cannot see how, even if Rohan comes, that could make much difference.

Rohan is preparing to come. So is Aragorn. In an action heralded in the Barrows, in Moria, and again in Shelob's Lair, Aragorn sets out with his Grey Company to take the Paths of the Dead. Aragorn is of course, as the descendant of the Kings of the North, pre-eminently qualified to summon those faithless dead in there and make them keep their word at last. But this episode, terrifying as it is, repeats such an often-adumbrated scene that it almost carries the weight of an allegory: you can take the failures of the past, much as Tolkien has by now taken most of Western literary heritage, and force them to do at least some good towards the future. Tolkien would deny this. He says irritably in the Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings,* "I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory' " (I, 7), and maybe he is right. And watch out. Strewn all around this section are striking examples of the fey or doomed utterance. Aragorn himself says, "It will be long, I fear, ere Theoden sits at ease again in Meduseld" (III, 46). Halbarad says in Dimholt, "This is an evil door, and my death lies beyond it" (III, 59). And in the midst of the battle, the Black Captain himself says, "No living man may hinder me!" (III, 116). This sort of thing has also been heralded, when Aragorn warns Gandalf against entering Moria. Because of that, we are prone to believe these sayings. Then notice that not one of them comes true in the way it suggests. Theoden is killed and never sits in Meduseld. Halbarad is not killed in the Paths of the Dead, but a long way out on the other side. And the Black Captain is hindered by a hobbit and killed by a girl. Since the bringing about of the future is what this movement is concerned with, we should be troubled.

For, you see, the battle which ought to be final, in which the forces of good throw everything they have at Mordor, is no such thing. It is a

magnificent battle though. One of Tolkien's gifts is being able to rise to the largest occasion. I wait with bated breath every time for Rohan to come, or not come, and sing as they slay. But when it is over, the enemy is still working on Denethor and Mordor is not destroyed. So, in a pattern which is now familiar, there is a coda to this huge movement. By now these codas are definitely forming an "afterwards" and looking to the future. In this one, Faramir and Eowyn find healing and love, and the other protagonists debate, in a way that echoes the Council of Elrond, and like that Council resolve on an act of aggression: they will attack Mordor as a diversion for Frodo. So are we to suppose that this whole movement has been a huge diversion?

Only then does Tolkien take up the story of Frodo and Sam. This is what might be called the slow movement, drear and negative and full of tribulation. Although it is odd that the positive side of the action is compounded of killing and politics, and the negative of love, endurance and courage, this is how it seems to be. Tolkien insists that the first is valueless without the second. Odd, as I said, particularly as the slight Christian tinge given to Minas Tirith definitely reflects on Frodo, who is now displaying what one thinks of as the humbler Christian virtues; and because the careful plotting of this movement, to make it in most ways the antithesis of the preceding one, keeps suggesting, to my mind at least, Clough's poem "Say not the struggle nought availeth." The force of that poem is that, even if you are not succeeding in your own locality, someone somewhere else *is*.

Anyway, as one side enters glorious Minas Tirith, Frodo and Sam creep into Mordor, its antithesis; and with them Gollum, a sort of anti-hobbit. This ignoble trio are the only ones likely to succeed. And they fail. Make no mistake, despite their courage, and their wholly admirable affection for one another, and Frodo's near transfiguration, their action is indeed negative. At the last minute, Frodo refuses to throw the Ring into the Cracks of Doom and puts it on instead. Their almost accidental success is due to a negative action both hobbits performed in the past. Frodo, not lovingly, spared Gollum's life. Sam, not understanding Gollum's loneliness in the marshes, threatened him and turned his incipient friendship to hatred. So Gollum bites off Frodo's finger and falls with it and the Ring into the Cracks of Doom.

Now what are we to make of this? I have of course put it far more baldly than Tolkien does, but it is there for everyone to read. I think the explanation is suggested in the very long coda to the entire story which takes up nearly half the last volume. Most writers would have been content to stop with the destruction of Mordor, or at least after the shorter coda of rejoicing and the celebrating of Nine-Fingered Frodo that fol-

lows the fall of Mordor. But Tolkien, characteristically, has a whole further movement, which now definitely is "and afterwards..."

Before we try to make sense of it, let me draw your attention to another aspect of Tolkien's narrative skill: his constant care to have each stage of his story viewed or experienced by one or other of his central characters. He had to split them apart to do it, but it is a great strength of the narrative, and one not often shared by his imitators. Each major event has a firm viewpoint and solid substance. Things are visualised, and because hobbits are present eating and drinking gets done. The overall effect is to show that huge events are composed of small ones, and, as was signalled at the beginning, that ordinary people can get forced to make history—forced by history itself. By this stage of the narrative, however, the idea is being proposed in a different form: even the smallest and most ignoble act can have untold effect. And thank goodness for Gollum.

Well, yes. But remember that Gollum only did for Frodo what the Dead did for Aragorn. And indeed much of this coda-of-codas is concerned with shrinking the scale again, back to the Shire, where the now battle-hardened hobbits make their bit of personal history by dislodging Saruman, and the hobbits of the Shire settle down with a happy sigh to draw quietly aside from the path of history. As Tolkien has been unobtrusively pointing out all along, if it were not for such folk, there would be nothing worth doing heroic things for. But we are being lulled again. We must not forget the Sea, nor the very clear statements that an Age of the world is passing. Tolkien was not cheating about that—it proves to have passed—but only suggesting that the next Age *could* be an Age of Sauron. And remember Sauron was never really precisely *there,* unlike all the other characters. Before we are prepared for it, the woodwind nostalgia theme is swelling again, to drown everything else. Sam is saddened to find his actions not remembered. A mallorn tree grows in the Shire. Frodo is ill and finishes writing his history. And at length it becomes evident that the destruction of the Age entails the passing of Elf rings too, along with Galadriel, and Gandalf, whose nature has been concealed in his name all along. And Frodo too. Frodo has become Elvish, quite literally. By his not-doing, however heroic, he has widowed himself from history, just like the Elves, and must now go off into the Sea like the rest.

Tolkien works his final sleight-of-narrative here. He was perfectly aware of the Germanic custom of ship-burial, in which a dead king was floated out to sea in a ship. Crossing the Sea is represented as a matter full of sadness, and Cirdan the shipwright is given many attributes of a priest, but the passing of Frodo is never represented as other than a permanent voyage. So the ending is heart-rendingly equivocal. You can see it as Frodo moving into eternity, or into history—or not. You can see it as a justifica-

tion—or not—of the negative side. In fact, we are experiencing the proper mode of Romance which was signalled right from the start. The values of the people who wrote Romances never seem quite the same as our own. This kind of equivocal ending where winning and failing amount to the same, Arthur passes to sleep in a hill, and a gift exacts its price, is exactly what should have been expected. You Were Warned. For good measure, you knew that life never comes round to a happy ending and stops there. There is always afterwards. But such was the skill with which this narrative was shaped that you could not see the pattern, even when it was being constantly put before you.

Yes, there really was nothing about narrative that Tolkien didn't know.

No One

One morning in the year 2084, the Right Honourable Mrs Barbara Scantion MP was talking to a friend in the House of Commons. "Yes, it's school holidays," she was saying. "My husband's in Madrid. We got a foreign girl to look after Edward, but Edward's just rung up to say she's walked out again. That's the second time this week!"

"Does that mean no one's looking after Edward?" the friend asked.

"Yes. No one's looking after Edward," Mrs Scantion said. She laughed.

A fly-on-the-wall bug recorded this conversation and it was duly passed on to the Anti-European Organisation, which wished to make use of Mrs Scantion. Unfortunately, it was entirely misunderstood.

No One was a robot—though Edward called him Nuth, short for Nothing. He was No. One in Knight Bros's special new series of White Knights, which meant he was fitted with every latest device in robotics, including a quasi-permanent power pac, long-distance radio and self-re-programming. He had an AT brain (meaning Advanced Type). His silver skin would only melt at extreme high temperatures, and, what was probably more useful, he could feel with his silver fingers. His pink eyes could see in the dark. In fact, he could see anything which was not actually invisible. He was programmed both to obey orders and think for himself. He was brand-new. He cost a bomb (Mr Scantion was very, very rich). And he knew he was utterly useless.

He got both his names because the Scantions looked up from reading, in the thick booklet which had come with him, that he was No. One in the White Knight Series. And the robot was not there. The passage leading to the garage door was empty. Since they had all seen the lorry drive up and deliver the big crate labeled FRAGILE THIS END UP, and since Mr Scantion had signed the delivery note with the robot unpacked and standing beside him in the garage, this puzzled everyone extremely.

It was quite simple. The moment Mr Scantion went through the door to the house, something slammed the door shut and left the garage in darkness. The robot could see another pair of large robot eyes not far

away. He thought he was in a store-place for robots and was meant to stay there.

"Can you tell me if I should stay here?" he asked the other robot politely. It was a car of some kind, he could see.

Its voice seemed to be made from grinding cogwheels together. "Think for yourself," it grunted unhelpfully.

"Yes, but I am new," the robot explained. "I am a household robot, so I assume I should be in a house. But the door is shut. Why is that?"

The car gave a hydraulic sort of sigh. "Someone shut it, of course! Wirenose! If you go close to it, the circuit will cause it to open again. That's how the softbodies do it."

"Thank you. What are softbodies?" asked the robot.

"Humans," grunted the car. "People. Folk. Owners." And as the robot walked towards the door, it snarled at him, in a perfect crash of cogs, "Learn to *think*, blobface! Or get scrapped!"

The lorry driver's mate had said that too, in the same disgusted way. The robot stepped through the door when it opened, wondering if there was something more to thinking than he had in his programmes. There were four humans (softbodies?) in the passage beyond, one of them unnaturally small, all with the lower hole in their faces pulled into an O.

"Nothing!" said Betty the foreign girl, whose English was always a stage behind the facts.

The robot advanced towards them on soundless spongy feet. "Think," he said. "Consider, judge, believe, or ponder."

To his confusion, Betty screamed and ran away, and the rest fell about laughing. Mr Scantion said, "No need to think. Your name's No One."

"Nothing's better," Edward said, but this joke was not attended to.

People very seldom attended to what Edward said. This confused No One, because he was told straight away that his main job was to take care of Edward. Betty the foreign girl was considered unreliable. She broke down all the time. When she did, she sobbed that she was "not happy!" and then put things in a blue suitcase and went away down the drive. Presumably she went to get serviced, because she always came back about twelve hours later. It became No One's job to release the switches on the gate to let Betty out, and then release them again when she came back. It was a special Security Gate, designed to keep Edward safe.

Edward was obviously very precious. No One was told that Edward was going to inherit some things called "the firm" and "responsibilities" later on. No One ran through his dictionary programme and discovered that "firm" meant the same as "hard, difficult." This must be why Edward always went white when these things were talked about. It was a sign of slight overload, the same sort of thing that made No One's eyes

pulse. Edward was being programmed, very slowly, in all sorts of hard things like manners and playing the piano. No One knew how that felt—and it had only taken six months to programme him: Edward was going to take years. He realised that Edward was very expensive indeed and treated him with great respect.

But he was confused. None of his programmes quite fitted things as they were. This was Knight Bros's fault. When Mr Scantion had ordered a household robot for Fawley Manor, someone in the office looked at a photo of the Manor and saw it was a large old house. They programmed No One for a large old house, not realising that Fawley Manor had been modernised throughout inside. The only old thing left was the stairs. The walls were energised screens and the furniture was energised foam blocks, all of which could be moved at the touch of a button, controlled by a robot fixture in the cellar. The kitchen was a mass of machinery. No One's eyes pulsed when he saw it. But Mrs Scantion had told him to cook supper because she was sick of autofood, so he located the freezer and opened it.

The freezer hummed frosty air complacently round No One. It was full of square grey frozen packets which all looked exactly alike. There was no way of telling carrots from éclairs, or beetroot from blackberries. "You'll have to melt everything to find out what it is," the freezer hummed.

"That would take too long," said No One. He held up a grey packet. "What is this?"

"Chicken drumsticks," hummed the freezer.

"And this?" asked No One, holding up another packet.

"I've forgotten," said the freezer. "You won't do it that way. My self-melt will come on if you keep me open much longer."

No One picked a bundle of grey packets out at random and shut the freezer. He put them in hot water in one of the sinks to thaw. While he was doing that, coffee beans began pouring out of a hopper in the opposite wall. No One went over to the hopper. "Why are you doing that?" he asked.

"Making-use-of-a-faulty-circuit-to-annoy-you," rattled the hopper. "Boo!" And coffee beans piled on the work surface.

No One tried to locate the faulty circuit. There was a gargling behind him. Even moving at superspeed, No One was not quick enough to stop the waste-disposal in the sink from eating every one of the grey packets, and he nearly lost a finger trying to. "Glumph," said the waste-disposal, satisfied. As No One went to the freezer for another set of grey packets, he distinctly heard something scuttering and scrambling out of his way. But there was nothing there. Whatever it was continued to scutter and scramble from then on, confusing No One thoroughly. Since it did

not seem to be there, he tried to ignore it. He stripped the plastic off the grey food and put it in the roasting oven. The autocook and the microwave at once flashed red lights at him.

"We're supposed to do that!" they said.

"I am supposed to cook by hand," No One told them. He turned the oven on. Nothing happened. "What is wrong with you?" No One asked it.

"I've come out in sympathy," said the oven. "My timer is set wrong."

No One made the oven work and tried to set the table as his programme told him. But all the knives and forks were in the dishwasher and the dishwasher would not open. "Drying, drying!" it said when No One tried its door. Meanwhile, coffee beans continued to pour out of the hopper. By now they were all over the floor. No One's spongy robot feet suddenly turned into skates. He careered across the kitchen area and sat down with a crash among the chairs in the dining area. There he was forced to sit for a while, checking his circuits. While he sat, the scuttering thing scrambled about under the table tittering. It almost could have been laughing. Nothing in No One's microchips had prepared him for any of this. In order to prevent extreme overload, he had to get up and go away for a while.

He came across Edward at the other end of the house, plonking away at a very simple programme on the piano. Edward stopped rather readily when he saw No One. "Hallo, Nuth. How are you getting on?"

"I do not understand," No One said, "why the large humans do not attend to you or why you are so small. You seem much better programmed than me already. I shall have to be scrapped. My programmes do not fit this house. "

Edward pushed the button that spun the piano stool round and looked up at No One. No One's eyes were pulsing from pink to white. "Poor Nuth!" he said. "But you're self-reprogramming, aren't you? That's like a human getting used to things. Are you programmed to play the piano?"

"Yes," said No One.

A gleeful smile came into Edward's face. "Then let's make a bargain. You do my piano practice and I'll help you reprogramme. OK?"

A bargain is not an order. No One decided it was better. His eyes stopped pulsing and he sat down at the piano. He played without having to learn how, and Edward corrected him by asking him to play slower, with random wrong notes. Both of them got something, No One realised, because, when the piano was finished with, Edward went to the kitchen area with him, where he stopped the hopper by turning off all the machinery on that side and then showed No One the suction-cleaner that

cleaned the floor just by pressing a switch. Then he kicked the dishwasher and made it give up the knives and forks and plates so that No One could set the table. And he went on helping No One during supper. That was a disaster, thanks to the freezer. No One found he was serving curried prawns with bread-and-butter pudding, followed by beetroot and molten peppermint ice-cream.

"But he doesn't eat so he doesn't know!" Edward explained, while No One stood abjectly waiting to be scrapped. "He'll know better next time."

Betty did not agree. It was this supper that made her pack her suitcase and leave for the first time. But Mr and Mrs Scantion listened to Edward for once and No One was not even sent away for reprogramming.

"You should have used the autocooker," Edward said to him afterwards. "But you can't disobey an order, can you? Another time, Nuth, you're to get round it by asking me to do it."

So a bargain was a way of getting round orders too. No One felt he was learning. But not learning fast enough. Betty came back the next morning, but it was No One's fault that she left for the third time, the morning Mr Scantion went to Madrid. (The time in between was Edward's fault. He hung a hairy plastic spider in Betty's shower.) The third time, it was No One's mousetraps.

These were to catch the scuttering, tittering thing. Robots do not have nerves, of course, but if they had, this thing would have got on No One's. It seemed to follow him about, and he was certain it laughed at his mistakes. He asked Edward what it might be. Edward said it was a mouse probably. No One spent half of one night thinking about this. Since robots do not sleep, No One usually spent the nights sitting on the stairs going through his programmes and finding out where they did not match things as they were. One of his programmes was called Miscellaneous Wisdom. It did not seem to match anything. It told him that fools rush in where angels fear to tread and to answer these fools according to their folly, that many hands make light work, but too many cooks spoil the broth. But one of the things it said was, "If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door." No One considered this. He considered the scuttering thing. From the sounds it made, his acute robot hearing deduced that it was half the size of Edward. That would take a big trap.

So, for the second half of that night, No One built mousetraps, bigger and better mousetraps, out of things he found in the roof storage-space. He made forty-two, all different, and spread them around the house in all the places he knew the scuttering thing went. He was a little troubled

that the world might shortly roll over on itself and beat a path through the garden, but it seemed to him that, since there was a good front drive already, the world would not feel any need to make a path as well. He did *not* put a mousetrap outside Betty's room. But, while he was still waiting to see if he had bent the world out of shape, there were terrible screams from Betty, and there she was, tangled in thirteen wire coat-hangers and the weights from an old clock.

"I am to die with this tin man!" Betty screamed.

No One was sure that someone had moved that mousetrap. He explained this to Mr Scantion, who simply ordered him to remove all forty-two traps and not to do it again. No One had moved thirty-nine, when Betty became tangled in the forty-second trap, his best, and it took Edward's help and Mr Scantion's to get her out. This one had mysteriously moved right down from the attic to outside the garage.

"I think they were really clever, Nuth," Edward said. But nobody else thought so. Betty went sobbing away upstairs to pack her suitcase. Mr Scantion pushed past them all to the garage because he had to drive to the airport. Mrs Scantion ordered No One to be particularly kind to Betty while they were both away. She was giving him a list of orders about what to do that day, when Mr Scantion burst angrily out of the garage again.

"My damn car won't start," he said. "You'll have to give me a lift in yours, Barbara. No One can mend the wretched thing while I'm away."

So Mrs Scantion drove both of them away in her blue semi-automated Datsun. Betty left five minutes after that. "And I am not back with you staying until comedom kings!" she said. "You may put that in your pipe and eat it!"

"Never mind," Edward said, while No One was resetting the Security Gate for the second time. "She's ever so boring. I'll ring up and tell Mum we don't want her anyway. Then we can have some fun." Edward had already discovered that No One had a programme called Games Capacity.

"I have my tasks to do first," said No One, and he went back to his problems in the kitchen area. He put the washing in the washer. That was simple. But he was supposed to cook Edward sausages for lunch, and the freezer would only show him identical grey packets as usual.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" it hummed when No One asked where to find the sausages.

Then the dishwasher started sending streams of water over the floor. "I don't like people kicking me," it told No One sulkily. Meanwhile, starting the clothes-washer had somehow started the hopper pouring out cof-

fee beans again. No One set the floor-cleaner to work and tried to mend the hopper again. He was still trying when the clothes-washer gave a commanding ping.

"Finished! I shall now move to drying mode."

"No you will not," said No One. "Mrs Scantion ordered me to hang the clothes outside. She likes them in the air."

"Huh!" said the clothes-washer. Its dial moved to DRY.

No One put on superspeed and switched it off. He wheeled up the laundry trolley and opened the washer door. Out came a tangled rope of laundry. "Have you," he asked the clothes-washer, "by any chance plaited one of Betty's stockings through everything else?"

"I always do," said the clothes-washer. "I like to watch softbodies untangling it. Are you soft or hard? You look like both."

"Hard," said No One, untwisting pants and shirts from the stocking. "What is this? I put in seven pairs of socks. I see fifteen socks in this twist, and five of them are odd ones. How is that done?"

"Us clothes-washers have always done that," said the machine. "It takes real skill."

As No One was wheeling the trolley to the door, the floor-cleaner choked and flashed sparks at him. He switched it off. The hopper poured out coffee beans. The autocooker sniggered. No One gave up for the moment and wheeled the washing outdoors to the outside drier, which was a thing like an umbrella that came out of the ground when you trod on a switch. No One trod on the switch as Edward had shown him. The drier stayed where it was. "Extrude, please," he told the drier.

"An order from a machine is not an order," said the drier. "You should have found that out by now."

And it stayed where it was. No One exerted his great robot strength and hauled it up out of the ground. It tried to collapse, but No One quickly tore the handle off the clothes-trolley and jammed it across the hole in the ground.

"Spoilsport!" said the drier. "Half-soft!"

No One left it sulkily twirling this way and that in the breeze and went to mend Mr Scantion's car. It was standing half out of the garage, which was as far as it had got before it stalled, and it was the car he had spoken to when he first arrived. No One wondered how he had dared. The car was an aristocrat. It was a vintage Robot Lofts-Robinson with a beautiful cream-coloured body and pink headlights. Since its numberplate was YZ 333 AUT, No One knew it must be at least eighty years old, one of the first fully intelligent cars ever made. This was not in his programmes. It was part of robot lore, passed from mouth to mouth in Knight Bros's

factory. No One knew the car was even more expensive than he was, and he approached it very respectfully indeed. "Good morning, sir. Do you know what is wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me," snarled the Lofts-Robinson in its cog-wheel voice. "I just didn't feel like going to the airport."

"Why not?" asked No One.

"I can do most things," grunted the Lofts-Robinson, "but I can't fly. It makes me envious when I see machines that can. So I stopped."

"But is that not disobeying an order?" No One asked.

"When you're my age, wirenose," said the car, "you'll have learnt how to get round any order they care to give you. You still haven't learnt to think, have you?"

"I have. A little," protested No One.

"Prove it," grunted the car. "What's my name?"

No One looked the car over. Since he still did not understand what made machines and people laugh, he did not quite understand why his voice jerked a little as he said, "A fully intelligent, fully automated automobile, number YZ 333 AUT, must surely be called Aut, sir."

"Right!" said the car, with a crunch of surprise. "What's yours?"

"No One, sir."

"Useful name," grunted Aut. "And how are you getting on in your household duties?"

"Not very well," No One confessed. "I am having to réprogramme myself. And there is a scuttling thing which laughs that Edward says is a mouse—"

"That's no mouse!" Aut interrupted. "That was the thing that slammed the garage door on you when you first came. Didn't you hear me say Someone shut it? I don't know what it is, but it answers to Someone. It goes with the house—been here since the place was built. It hates all us machines. Better watch out, or it'll get you scrapped, robot."

"But it seems to get on with the kitchen machines," said No One.

"Don't be too sure of that!" Aut grunted.

No One left Aut dozing in the sun and went to his next task, which was to mow the lawn. Aut had told him a great deal which did not match any programme he had. He was trying to adjust to it all the way to the shed where the lawnmower lived. The lawnmower was only a semi-intelligent robot, with a bigger brain than the floor-cleaner, but not much. "Don't ask me to do the grass alone," it said as No One wheeled it out. "I'm no thinker."

"But you have been here longer than me," No One said. "You can tell me about the creature called Someone. Is it hard or soft?"

"I don't know that it's either one," said the mower. "But I heard it drinks milk. Where do I start?"

No One surveyed the garden. One half of it looked a neat flat green. The other half was green too, but high and ragged. Obviously the ragged half needed mowing. "Here," he said, wheeling the mower over to the high part.

The mower started with a whoop and a roar, joyously, and went to work with a will. It cut two long swathes in the ragged green stuff. Then it choked. It stopped, chugging with juicy uncontrollable laughter. "Do you know what we just mowed?" it coughed.

"Grass," said No One.

"*Grass!* Oh, my rotors!" laughed the mower. "We just cut down Scantion's dahlias. And before that we did for his raspberry canes. Oh, he will be mad!" Here it sobered down. "Look what you made me do!" it chugged dismally. "We'll both be scrapped for this!"

"Oh, dear," said No One. His acute robot hearing picked up the snuffling sound in the bushes. Someone was there, laughing at him. He also picked up a gasp from Edward, who was standing at the back door with both hands over his mouth. Edward had taught him to bargain. "I will admit it was all my fault," he told the mower, "so that it will be me who is scrapped. In exchange, you must tell me truthfully why all the machines are making fun of me all the time."

"Had orders, didn't I? We all did," the mower said. "Mind you, it was funny too."

"Whose orders?" said No One.

"Don't make me say," whined the mower. "He'd melt my chips."

"Is Aut part of the fun?" asked No One.

"Old Man Aut!" said the mower. "I should say not! He's a half-soft like you. He doesn't take orders."

"Thank you," said No One and walked sadly back to the house. "How long do dahlias and raspberries take to grow?" he asked Edward.

"Ages!" said Edward. "Nuth, Dad's going to be furious. I don't want you scrapped. What shall we do?"

"I must try to think for once," No One said. He went into the house. He deserved to be scrapped. His programmes were no good at all. They did not even tell him what grass looked like. He went to the phone. He dialed Automart and ordered it to send Fawley Manor five hundred dahlia plants and a thousand raspberry canes by Express. That should be enough. Then he went to Mr Scantion's County Computer Outlet and asked it about Someone.

County Computer was unhelpful and inclined to be snappish. "This thing does not exist," it said.

"But I can hear it," said No One. "It laughs. My audials do not lie. It moves things about the house."

"Your audials must have flange-flutter," said County Computer. "You say it isn't machine, or animal, or human, and you can't see it, but it drinks milk. You're telling me it's supernatural. Such things do not exist."

"I see," said No One. This unhelpfulness was probably quite helpful. Pondering it, he went towards the cellar door.

Edward ran after him. "Nuth, you can't go there! That's where House Control is. No one's allowed down there."

No One turned and looked at Edward. "No One?" he said. To both their surprise, No One's silver face wrinkled in a way which, in a human, would have been a smile. He opened the cellar door and went down the stone steps.

"Warn off! Warn off!" said House Control, flashing blue sparks. Little blue and red lights dimpled all over it. It was a large black installation with cables running from it in all directions. "No one is allowed to approach me!"

"That is all right. I am No One," said No One. "Please stop sparking. I do not melt at those temperatures and I am more expensive than you. Why are you ordering all the machines to make fun of me?"

"It's boring down here," complained House Control. "Besides, I do everything which needs doing in this house. We don't need a half-soft like you."

"But I am here mainly to look after Edward," No One explained. "And he costs more than either of us."

"I look after Edward," said House Control. "I run six different burglar alarms and an emergency line to the police. I only let things through Security Gate if I have pictures of them in my memory bank. I don't need you. When you came, I was warned that you'd try to take over my functions, and you are doing. Go and get scrapped!"

"I shall get scrapped," said No One, "as soon as Mr Scantion gets back. So you have won. Now let us make a bargain for the time I have left. If you will order the machines to behave, you can help me look after Edward and have some fun as well."

"What kind of fun?" House Control asked suspiciously.

"A game," said No One. "My Games Capacity programme tells me that you have many possibilities. Edward and I will go to the attic, and you must try to stop us getting down through the house to the Security Gate. But you must let me refuel Edward first with some sausages, or he may break down on the way."

"Done!" said House Control. "If I hold you up till nightfall, then I've won. This is going to be good. Shout 'Coming, ready or not' when we start, and I'll throw the whole house at you."

"But there is a rule that you don't hurt Edward," said No One.

Edward greeted him with relief as he climbed out of the cellar. He was even more enthusiastic than House Control about the game. "I don't need lunch," he said.

But No One had his orders. They went to the kitchen area. There, the hopper had stopped pouring out beans and the dishwasher was no longer sending out water. The floor-cleaner was at work sucking up coffee beans and wiping up water. When No One went to the freezer, the grey packet on top was obviously sausages. The microwave meekly allowed him to put the sausages in it to thaw. But the clothes-washer grumbled to itself and the autocooker protested, "I can cook sausages. I am a professional artiste and you're just a Jack of All Trades. Let me do him some of my spinach pancakes *au maison.*"

"Edward is going to cook the sausages," No One said hastily.

Edward liked cooking as it turned out. He liked his sausages black on one side and pink on the other, which No One's programme assured him was incorrect. The autocooker agreed. "And he's just a blasted amateur," it said.

"Quiet," said No One. "Edward, what is your full name?"

Edward looked round as he carried his plateful of parti-coloured sausages to the dining area. "Edward Roderick Fitzherbert De Courcy Scantion. Isn't it awful? Why?"

"To help me learn to think," No One explained. "Why is it Fitzherbert and De Courcy?"

"After Mum's ancestors," said Edward and departed to eat his sausages.

No One fetched a saucer of milk and put it in the middle of the clean floor. Then he stood as still as only a robot can, waiting. His audials picked up an eager little pattering almost at once. The milk in the saucer began gently rippling, and getting less as it rippled. The very slight sounds that went with this assured No One that something about half the size of Edward was drinking the milk. He let it almost finish. Then he said, "Someone." His audials told him that the thing sat up and looked at him. He said, "Someone, you are being unfair to me. I have a programme called History of Fawley Manor which tells me that when Edward's ancestors owned this house, they too had servants dressed in silver like me to look after them. I am quite traditional really."

Someone did speak, in a sort of way. No One understood it when it told him it was too bad! And anyway, silver servants were always expendable.

"Maybe," No One said cunningly. "And you have organised the machines against me so that I shall be scrapped. This is a pity, since I am now programmed to give you milk. Nobody else knows you exist."

True, Someone agreed. But it saw No One's game, and it didn't have to have milk: it just enjoyed it now and then. He didn't think it would ever put up with something as improbable and newfangled as a man-machine, did he? Look at what people had done to Fawley Manor already! No One was the last straw!

"Think again," said No One. "I am so new and advanced that I am as improbable as you are. We have a great deal in common. Our names prove it. It is the attraction of opposites." That was from the Miscellaneous Wisdom programme, which perhaps was not so useless after all. "The wheel has come full circle," No One added.

Put that way, Someone said, there was something in what No One said.

"And I think we are both anxious for Edward's safety," said No One.

As for that, Edwards come and Edwards go, said Someone. But he *was* the heir to Fawley. Very well, it said grudgingly. It would see what it could do about stopping No One getting scrapped—though, frankly, it couldn't see what. Mr Scantion was not going to forgive those dahlias in a hurry.

"Thank you," said No One. He was putting down another saucer of milk, when he heard the chimes from the Security Gate. That meant Betty had come back, rather sooner than she usually did. No One went to the Gate panel beside the front door. Edward stuffed the last sausage into his mouth and pattered after him.

Betty's face appeared in the panel, looking woebegone even for her. "I am come back," she announced morbidly. "By wild horses dragged—ai-ai-ai! I mean this is me what am by this gate is."

"Don't let her in, Nuth," said Edward. "She'll spoil the game with House Control."

This probably counted as an order. No One hesitated. Security Gate said, "Have to let her in, House. Face on the memory banks."

"Bother it!" said House Control. "Yes, I agree we have to. Never mind. She'll probably walk out again when the fun starts. Press the switch, No One."

"I suppose you'd better really," Edward said, sighing.

And Mrs Scantion had told him to be especially nice to Betty. No One rather reluctantly pressed the switch, wondering why— The panel swirled and went blank, which was not usual. "What is Betty doing?" No One said.

"Who cares?" said Edward. "Leave the door on the latch for her and let's get up to the attic and start the game at least."

They had got to the foot of the stairs when the front door crashed open. Betty was hustled through it by four strange men who all had guns.

Behind them, outside the open door, were the pink headlights of a strange robot car.

"Stand where you are, both of you!" shouted one of the men.

Another said, "Damn it! That's a robot. Why didn't you warn us, girl?" and hit Betty so hard that she fell over.

Betty lay in a terrified huddle, screaming, "Nobody asked and I done telled you! Swear I! And is stupid robot, stupid!"

No One stood by the stairs with his eyes pulsing from pink to white, almost on extreme overload now he saw what he had done. He had seen irregularities in Betty's behaviour. She had tried to warn him. If ever a robot deserved scrapping, he did for this.

Beside him, Edward was on overload too. His face was so white it had a greenish tinge. "What do you lot think you're doing?" he said loudly. "How did you get in?"

"By disconnecting the Gate as soon as you threw the switch in the house," one of the men said smugly. "I'm a gate expert."

"And you're coming with us, lad," said another man. "Come quietly and you won't get hurt."

"Why?" said Edward.

"Because your Mum can be useful to us in Parliament, and your Dad can be even more useful to us with money," said the man who had shouted. "Come over here before I shoot you in the leg, there's a good boy."

As Edward started moving slowly across the hall space, No One recollected what Aut had told him and took a step forward. "Stand still, robot!" shouted the man who had hit Betty.

"I am a household robot. You have to order me by name," said No One, and he kept walking.

The man darted forward and snatched hold of Edward's arm. "What's your robot's name, boy? Out with it, or someone will get hurt!"

"Nuth," said Edward. "Stand still, Nuth, please!" Since Edward had ordered him, No One was forced to stop, while Edward went on, "No One can help. No One can walk about without getting shot. A bullet through your brain would finish you just like a human, Nuth. There," he said to the man. "I've made Nuth see reason."

He had indeed. As the men walked towards the front door with Edward, No One used his radio to House Control. "Coming, ready or not," he said. "In the hall. Count the four men as playing, but count me and Betty out."

"Right," said House Control. One of the moveable walls instantly slid across the open front door, blocking the men's path. The men backed away from it, shouting in surprise. They glanced angrily at No One, but

he was standing stock-still. While they were looking, two moveable sofas came racing down on them. House Control had spent Edward's lunch-time working out its plan of campaign. But, since No One had told it to leave Betty out, it simply forgot about her. No One was forced to move into superspeed, pick Betty off the floor, and drop her on top of the sofa as it whizzed across the place where she had been crouching.

There was a loud noise. Something clanged on the side of No One's head and he swayed on his spongy feet.

"No, don't!" Edward shouted. "Nuth had to do that! Robots aren't allowed to let people get hurt. Stand still, Nuth."

No One was forced to stand obediently by the wall across the front door, while the men dragged Edward away towards the living area. "Show us the back door, lad," one of them said. "And no tricks." Betty buried her head under the sofa cushions and sobbed. She was not going to be any help.

"Did your alarm go off at the police station?" No One radioed to House Control.

"No," said House Control disgustedly. "They cut all my wires."

"Then hold them up as long as you can," No One radioed. He turned his radio to full volume, tuned it to BBC One, set it to repeat, and broadcast an appeal for help. That meant that he was out of touch with House Control, but House Control seemed to be doing quite well on its own. Whenever the four men tried to drag Edward towards the back door, a wall slid and got in their way. They had to make their way through a moving maze. Every time they saw an opening and dived for it, there was a table or an armchair in the way. Every time they came near a heating-vent, steam whistled out at them and drove them backwards.

"Someone! Where are you?" called No One.

Someone scuttered round the end of the sofa where Betty was. This was a pretty pickle! it said. Fat lot of use No One was as a servitor!

"I know," said No One. "I must certainly be scrapped. Can you think of any way to get rid of the car those men came in?"

Someone chuckled. Just watch! And, in its supernatural way, it melted itself through the wall and through the front door. Meanwhile, the four men were kicking over the cocktail cabinet that was blocking their way to the dining area and hurrying through towards the kitchen. House Control had laid an ambush here. The floor-cleaner trundled out from behind the last wall, set to blow. A blast of dirty coffee beans met the four men. When they tried to take shelter behind the dining table, the table dodged.

"No One can do anything to help!" Edward screamed above the rattling beans.

This allowed No One to go to the nearest window, where he could see the men's robot car standing by the front door. The lawnmower was advancing on it, roaring. "Out, out!" it howled, whirling its rotors threateningly. "I shall slash your tyres!" The car juddered nervously and backed off down the drive. The lawnmower followed it. "Go away! I shall have you in ribbons!"

Then one of the men shot the floor-cleaner and they all rushed past it to the kitchen area. House Control had laid on a splendid reception here. The refrigerator, which was a very meek machine, lay sideways across the entry. On top of it stood the microwave, far from meek, open and turned on. The men got out of its way quickly, knowing they could be cooked. But the gate expert pulled himself together and waved an arm in front of the microwave—the arm was Edward's, not his own—and the safety circuit at once switched the microwave off. Another of the men shoved it to the floor, and they all scrambled over the refrigerator into knee-deep foam from the dishwasher and the clothes-washer. Under the foam, like mines in a minefield, lay grey frozen packets from the freezer. All five of them, Edward included, slid flat on their backs. As they lay there, the pepper grinder began to work, and the coffee grinder, the flour dispenser, the cornflakes hopper, the spice mill and the garlic crusher.

No One overrode his own safety circuits by assuring them that he was going to be scrapped anyway. He walked out through the window in a shower of burglar-proofed double-glazing and went at superspeed down the drive to shut the Security Gate again. The robot car was by then doing a desperate U-turn through Mrs Scantion's rose garden, and the lawnmower was flailing after it. Fast as No One went, the car was faster. It flashed past him on the drive, crashed through the Gate, and roared away down the road, with the angry lawnmower in such hot pursuit that it left a vapour trail like a jet plane. By the time No One reached the Gate, it was a complete wreck. He picked it up, trailing wires, and stood it between the gateposts.

That wouldn't even stop a mouse, Someone remarked, scuttering at his feet. Why didn't people use boiling oil these days?

"I hope the autocooker is doing that," No One said.

The autocooker was using spinach pancakes at that moment. It was having the time of its life. As soon as the five foamy, sneezing humans floundered to their feet in a storm of flour and pepper and cornflakes, the little doors on the autocooker began to open and shut and food flew out of them. The oven and the roaster and the grill backed it up by sending out blasts of hot air, but the autocooker did the real damage. It hurled its entire menu at the four men. It threw soufflés, squirted cocoa, shot cutlets and scrambled eggs, and bombed out steak-and-kidney pies. The men

dragged Edward as far as the back door twice, only to be driven back by a storm of hot sausages.

"What can we block the gateway with?" No One asked Someone.

Leave that to me, Someone said. No One had better go and get rid of the other horseless carriage before the men thought of taking Edward away in that.

"I still have not learnt to think," No One said as he supersped up the drive again. He had not seen that Aut was a danger.

He hurtled past the back door. The four men burst out of it a second later, hauling Edward with them, all of them red-eyed and plastered with food. The autocooker had run out of ammunition. But House Control had not finished yet.

"My turn for fun at last," the clothes-drier remarked as the humans hurried past it. It snapped a nylon rope loose and went on whirling. The rope, and the washing on it, wrapped itself round the whole dirty group, and went on wrapping as the drier twirled. It had them wrapped up in a struggling, shouting bundle by the time No One sped up to Aut.

"Hide somewhere," No One said to Aut. "Four humans are trying to kidnap Edward, and they will use you to take him away in if they see you."

Aut gave a hydraulic yawn. He did not want to move. "It's a long time, wirenose," he grunted, "since I obeyed an order. I never did take orders from robots."

"Please, sir," said No One.

"They won't be able to do a thing with me," said Aut. "All right. If it makes you happy, I'll go to ground in the shrubbery." His gears grated. In a leisurely way, he started his engine and rolled slowly across the lawn.

No One's Miscellaneous Wisdom programme told him that pride goeth before a fall. And it was proved true. The man who had shot the floor-cleaner had a knife. He slashed at stockings, vests and nylon rope, until the food-covered washing fell away. The four of them hurried Edward round to the front of the house, to find their own car gone and Aut trundling majestically across the lawn.

"Catch it!" they shouted. They were—understandably—desperate to get away by then. They ran across the lawn after Aut, spreading out as they ran. One of them threw himself in front of Aut. Aut's brakes squealed. He tried to go into reverse, but the man with the knife dragged Edward up behind. Aut jolted to a stop and tried to turn left. The man who had hit Betty quickly got on that side, and, while Aut was still on left-lock, the gate expert got on his right. Aut could not move. Robot cars had been designed specially to prevent road accidents, and that was one order Aut had to obey.

"Rounded up like a blasted *cow!*" Aut snarled and tried to hold his doors shut. But this was child's play to the gate expert. He shorted them open in seconds, and all four climbed in, pulling Edward with them.

"Excuse me," No One said to the clothes-drier. He plucked it out of the ground, trailing rope and dirty washing in all directions, and stationed himself in the drive as a last defence.

"Feel free," the drier said faintly, as the gate expert overcame Aut by putting him on manual override and drove straight at them. No One brandished the drier in circles.

"Well done!" thundered Aut. "I shall choose to think you are human." His cogs shrieked. He overrode the override and juddered away backwards. Because he was not allowed to injure humans by running into the house or the garage, he sped backwards in a huge circle, backwards over the lawn, backwards across the remains of the dahlias, and on into the cabbage patch. There he pretended to stall, so that he could sink heavily into the cloggy earth. But as soon as he stopped, the gate expert overrode the overridden override. Aut was forced to set off again, forwards this time. He fought for his steering the whole way, so that he went in another huge circle, across the lawn and through one side of the shrubbery, and then round towards No One with his bonnet wreathed in ornamental ivy. No One waved the drier again. Aut sheered off and began going round and round the lawn in tight circles.

All the Miscellaneous Wisdom must be true, No One saw, watching Aut's tyres plough grass up. The mousetrap had started it by sending Betty away. The world, or four of it, had used Betty to get in. Now, with Aut's help, it was beating paths all over the place.

"I'm off again!" Aut boomed through his exhausts. "Watch for Edward this time!" And he shot off into the shrubbery again. There was a great crashing and laurel bushes whipped about. Aut came speeding out, with one door just shutting and a mound of greenery across his windscreen. "Edward's in there!" he thundered at No One and went speeding away down the drive.

No One arrived at the shrubbery carrying the drier like a maypole, to find Edward climbing out of a broken laurel bush. "That was quite fun, Nuth!" he said. "There's a helicopter coming. Do you think it's the police?"

Robots have trouble looking upwards. No One had just discovered that this was another of his defects, when he and Edward both heard Aut's brakes squealing. The men must have got him to stop. "Stay here. Hide," No One said to Edward, and he supersped back to the drive and on down it, holding the drier like a battering-ram in case of trouble, with torn and grubby washing fluttering around him.

That looked almost traditional, Someone told him, meeting him halfway. Come and look how clever it had been.

Aut, looking very righteous, had stopped with his front bumper an inch from the Gate. The Gate itself was leaning almost upright against piles of wooden boxes with green plants in them, and bundles and bundles of raspberry canes. Behind this barrier was a row of police robots and what seemed to be a police van. Behind that again, the lawnmower was prowling up and down, still obviously very angry. As No One arrived, the four men piled out of Aut, saw the robots outside the Gate, and turned back. On that side they saw No One charging at them with the clothes-drier, and a helicopter landing behind him, full of human policemen. They dropped their guns and held their hands up.

"How was that done?" No One asked, looking at the things outside the gate.

Automart robots are very stupid, Someone explained. It had ordered them to put the plants there, and they had. Then it had ordered them to stay and pretend to be police robots, and they had done that too. Just, it added airily, a touch of illusion.

No One prodded the four men with the drier and forced them to march up the drive towards the real police getting out of the helicopter. "What are you?" he asked Someone as he prodded.

No one knows! retorted Someone gleefully, and faded away into the bushes.

Aut helped No One march the four men by rolling backwards up the drive with greenery dropping off his battered bonnet. "I don't think I shall be scrapped," he said to No One uneasily. "I am a valuable vintage car. But I'm not so sure about you, No One."

No One considered the ruined Gate, the ruined garden, the broken window, and the chaos indoors, and he had no doubt.

He did not have to wait long. His broadcast had been picked up all over Europe and the British Isles. There was already a combine harvester grumbling up the road to the gate, shouting that it was ready to flatten anything. A string of private cars was behind that, hooting to the harvester to get out of the way. Two more helicopters came whirling up while the police were taking Edward's statement and trying to make sense of Betty's. Since the garden was now mostly flat, they had no trouble landing. The world was going on beating paths to the door, No One saw, just as Miscellaneous Wisdom predicted. Then Mrs Scantion tumbled out of one helicopter and Mr Scantion jumped out of the other. No One judged it prudent to stand out of sight behind Aut and let Betty do the talking.

"Oh, I am so fright!" Betty screamed, racing up to the helicopters. "They hold guns and the walls move and the Gate thinks I am me. The tin man he shot in the face and now he grins horrible!"

This was true. When Edward and his parents had talked to the police and then dealt with the thousands of offers of help—including the man who advised them to scrap all robots—they found that the bullet which had hit No One had dented one side of his face. It now had a silver lopsided smile.

"What do you think?" Mr Scantion asked. "We could send him to the panel-beaters along with Aut."

"Oh, no," said Mrs Scantion. "I so much prefer him smiling."

"So do I," said Edward.

No One was confused. His eyes pulsed. It seemed he was not to be scrapped after all. Since he had done nothing but make mistakes, he avoided overload by deciding that it was because Edward was even more expensive than he had thought. It puzzled him that there was nothing in his programmes about how much humans cost.

Dragon Reserve, Home Eight

Where to begin? Neal and I had had a joke for years about a little green van coming to carry me off—this was when I said anything more than usually mad—and now it was actually happening. Mother and I stood at my bedroom window watching the van bouncing up the track between the dun green hills, and neither of us smiled. It wasn't a farm van, and most of our neighbours visit on horseback anyway. Before long, we could see it was dark green with a silver dragon insigne on the side.

"It *is* the Dragonate," Mother said. "Siglin, there's nothing I can do." It astonished me to hear her say that. Mother only comes up to my shoulder, but she held her land and our household, servants, Neal and me, and all three of her husbands, in a hand like iron, *and* she drove out to plough or harvest if one of my fathers was ill. "They said the dragons would take you," she said. "I should have seen. You think Orm informed on you?"

"I know he did," I said. "It was my fault for going into the Reserve."

"I'll blood an axe on him," Mother said, "one of these days. But I can't do it over this. The neighbours would say he was quite right." The van was turning between the stone walls of the farmyard now. Chickens were squirting and flapping out of its way and our sheepdog pups were barking their heads off. I could see Neal up on the wash-house roof watching yearningly. It's a good place to watch from because you can hide behind the chimney. Mother saw Neal too. "Siglin," she said, "don't let on Neal knows about you."

"No," I said. "Nor you either."

"Say as little as you can, and wear the old blue dress—it makes you look younger," Mother said, turning towards the door. "You might just get off. Or they might just have come about something else," she added. The van was stopping outside the front door now, right underneath my window. "I'd best go and greet them," Mother said, and hurried downstairs.

While I was forcing my head through the blue dress, I heard heavy boots on the steps and a crashing knock at the door. I shoved my arms

into the sleeves, in too much of a hurry even to feel indignant about the dress. It makes me look about twelve and I am nearly grown up! At least, I was fourteen quite a few weeks ago now. But Mother was right. If I looked too immature to have awakened, they might not question me too hard. I hurried to the head of the stairs while I tied my hair with a childish blue ribbon. I knew they had come for me, but I had to *see.*

They were already inside when I got there, a whole line of tall men tramping down the stone hallway in the half-dark, and Mother was standing by the closed front door as if they had swept her aside. What a lot of them, just for me! I thought. I got a weak, sour feeling and could hardly move for horror. The man at the front of the line kept opening the doors all down the hallway, calm as you please, until he came to the main parlour at the end. "This room will do nicely," he said. "Out you get, you." And my oldest father, Timas, came shuffling hurriedly out in his slippers, clutching a pile of accounts and looking scared and worried. I saw Mother fold her arms. She always does when she is angry.

Another of them turned to Mother. "We'll speak to you first," he said, "and your daughter after that. Then we want the rest of the household. Don't any of you try to leave." And they went into the parlour with Mother and shut the door.

They hadn't even bothered to guard the doors. They just assumed we would obey them. I was shaking as I walked back to my room, but it was not terror any more. It was rage. I mean—we have all been brought up to honour the Dragonate. They are the cream of the men of the Ten Worlds. They are supposed to be gallant and kind and dedicated and devote their lives to keeping us safe from Thrallers, not to speak of maintaining justice, law and order all over the Ten Worlds. Dragonate men swear that Oath of Alienation, which means they can never have homes or families like ordinary people. Up to then, I'd felt sorry for them for that. They give up so much. But now I saw they felt it gave them the right to behave as if the rest of us were not real people. To walk in as if they owned our house. To order Timas out of his own parlour. Oh I was angry!

I don't know how long Mother was in the parlour. I was so angry it felt like seconds until I heard flying feet and Neal hurried into my room. "They want you now."

I stood up and took some of my anger out on poor Neal. I said, "Do you still want to join the Dragonate? Swear that stupid Oath? Behave like you own the Ten Worlds?"

It was mean. Neal looked at the floor. "They said straight away," he said. Of course he wanted to join. Every boy does, particularly on Sveridge, where women own most of the land. I swept down the stairs, angrier than ever. All the doors in the hallway were open and our people were stand-

ing in them, staring. The two housemen were at the dining-room door, the cattlewoman and two farmhands were looking out of the kitchen, and the stableboy and the second shepherd were craning out of the pantry. I thought, They still will be my people some day! I refuse to be frightened! My fathers were in the doorway of the bookroom. Donal and Yan were in work-clothes and had obviously rushed in without taking their boots off. I gave them what I hoped was a smile, but only Timas smiled back. They all know! I thought as I opened the parlour door.

There were only five of them, sitting facing me across our best table. Five was enough. All of them stood up as I came in. The room seemed full of towering green uniforms. It was not at all like I expected. For one thing, the media always shows Dragonate as fair and dashing and handsome, and none of these were. For another, the media had led me to expect uniforms with big silver panels. These were all plain green, and four of them had little silver stripes on one shoulder.

"Are you Sigrid's daughter Siglin?" asked the one who had opened all the doors. He was a bleached, pious type like my father Donal and his hair was dust-colour.

"Yes," I said rudely. "Who are you? Those aren't Dragonate uniforms."

"Camerati, lady," said one who was brown all over with wriggly hair. He was young, younger than my father Yan, and he smiled cheerfully, like Yan does. But he made my stomach go cold. Camerati are the crack force, cream of the Dragonate. They say a man has to be a genius even to be considered for it.

"Then what are you doing here?" I said. "And why are you all standing up?"

The one in the middle, obviously the chief one, said, "We always stand up when a lady enters the room. And we are here because we were on a tour of inspection at Holmstad anyway, and there was a Slaver scare on this morning. So we offered to take on civic duties for the regular Dragonate. Now if that answers your questions, let me introduce us all." He smiled too, which twisted his white, crumpled face like a demon mask. "I am Lewin, and I'm Updriten here. On your far left is Driten Palino, our recorder." This was the pious type, who nodded. "Next to him is Driten Renick of Law Wing." Renick was elderly and iron-grey, with one of those necks that look like a chicken's leg. He just stared. "Underdriten Terens is on my left, my aide and witness." That was brown-and-wriggly. "And beyond him is Cadet Alectis, who is traveling with us to Home Nine."

Alectis looked a complete baby, only a year older than me, with pink cheeks and sandy hair. He and Terens both bowed and smiled so politely that I nearly smiled back. Then I realised that they were treating me as if

I was a visitor. In my own home! I bowed freezingly, the way Mother usually does to Orm.

"Please sit down, Siglin," Lewin said politely.

I nearly didn't, because that might keep them standing up too. But they were all so tall I'd already got a crick in my neck. So I sat grandly on the chair they'd put ready facing the table. "Thank you," I said. "You are a very kind host, Updriten Lewin." To my great joy, Alectis went bright red at that, but the other four simply sat down too. Pious Palino took up a memo block and poised his fingers over its keys. This seemed to be in case the recorder in front of Lewin went wrong. Lewin set that going. Wriggly Terens leaned over and passed me another little square box.

"Keep this in your hand," he said, "or your answers may not come out clearly."

I caught the words *lie detector* from his wriggly head as clearly as if he had said them aloud. I don't think I showed how very scared I was, but my hand made the box wet almost straight away.

"Court is open," Lewin said to the recorder. "Presiding Updriten Lewin." He gave a string of numbers and then said, "First hearing starts on charges against Siglin, of Upland Holding, Wormstow, North Sveridge on Home Eight, accused of being heg and heg concealing its nature. Questions begin. Siglin, are you clear what being heg is?" He crumpled one eyebrow upwards at me.

"No," I said. After all, no one has told me in so many words. It's just a thing people whisper and shudder at.

"Then you'd better understand this," Lewin said. He really was the ugliest and most outlandish of the five. Dragonate men are never posted to the world of their birth, and I thought Lewin must come from one a long way off. His hair was black, so black it had blue lights, but, instead of being dark all over to match it, like wriggly Terens, he was a lot whiter than me and his eyes were a most piercing blue—almost the colour they make the sky on the media. "If the charges are proved," he said, "you face death by beheading, since that is the only form of execution a heg cannot survive. Renick—"

Elderly Renick swept sourly in before Lewin had finished speaking. "The law defines a heg as one with human form who is not human. Medical evidence of brain pattern or nerve and muscle deviations is required prior to execution, but for a first hearing it is enough to establish that the subject can perform one or more of the following: mind-reading, kindling fire or moving objects at a distance, healing or killing by the use of the mind alone, surviving shooting, drowning or suffocation, or enslaving or otherwise afflicting the mind of a beast or human."

He had the kind of voice that bores you anyway. I thought, Great gods! I don't think I can do half those things! Maybe I looked blank. Palino

stopped clicking his memo block to say, "It's very important to understand why these creatures must be stamped out. They can make people into puppets in just the same way that the Slavers can. Foul." Actually, I think he was explaining to Alectis. Alectis nodded humbly. Palino said, definitely to me, "Slavers do it with those V-shaped collars. You must have seen them on the media. Quite foul."

"We call them Thrallers," I said. Foul or not, I thought, I'm the only one of me I've got! I can't help being made the way I am.

Lewin flapped his hand to shut Palino up and Renick went on again. "A heg is required by law to give itself up for execution. Any normal person who knowingly conceals a heg is likewise liable for execution." Now I knew why Mother had told me to keep Neal out of it.

Then it seemed to be Palino's turn. He said, "Personal details follow. How old are you—er—Sigrun?"

"Sig*lin,*" I said. "Fourteen last month."

Renick stretched out his chicken neck. "In this court's opinion, subject is old enough to have awakened as heg." He looked at Terens.

Terens said, "I witness. Girls awaken early, don't they?"

Palino, tapping away, said, "Mother, Sigrid, also of Upland Holding."

At which Lewin leaned forward. "Cleared by this court," he said. I was relieved to hear that. Mother is clever. She hadn't let them know she knew.

Palino said, "And your father is—?"

"Timas, Donal and Yan," I said. I had to bite the inside of my cheek not to laugh at how annoyed he was by that.

"Great Tew, girl!" he said. "A person can't have three fathers!"

"Hold it, Palino," said Lewin. "You're up against local customs here. Men outnumber women three to one on Home Eight."

"In Home Eight law, a woman's child is the child of all her husbands equally," Renick put in. "No more anomalous than the status of the Ahrings on Seven really."

"Then tell me how I rephrase my question," Palino said waspishly, "in the light of the primitive customs of Home Eight."

I said, "There's no such place as Home Eight. This world is called Sveridge." Primitive indeed!

Palino gave me a pale glare. I gave him one back. Lewin cut in, smooth and humorous, "You're up against primitive Dragonate custom here, Siglin. We refer to all the worlds by numbers, from Albion, Home One, to Yurov, Home Ten, and the worlds of the Outer Manifold are Cath One, Two, Three and Four to us. Have you really no idea which of your mother's husbands is actually your father?"

After that they all began asking me. Being heg is inherited, and I knew they were trying to find out if any of my fathers was heg too. At length even Alectis joined in, clearing his throat and going very red because he was only a Cadet. "I know we're not supposed to know," he said, "but I bet you've tried to guess. I did. I found out in the end."

That told me he was Sveridge too. And he suddenly wasn't a genius in the Camerati any more, but just a boy. "Then I bet you wished you hadn't!" I said. "My friend Inga at Hillfoot found out, and hers turned out to be the one she's always hated."

"Well," said Alectis, redder still. "Er—it wasn't the one I'd hoped—"

"That's why I've never asked," I said. And that was true. I'd always hoped it was Timas till now. Donal is so moral, and Yan is fun, but he's under Donal's thumb even more than he's under Mother's. But I didn't want my dear old Timas in trouble.

"Well, a cell-test should settle it," Lewin said. "Memo for that, Palino. Terens, remind me to ask how the regular Dragonate usually deal with it. Now—Siglin, this charge was laid against you by a man known as Orm the Worm Warden. Do you know this man?"

"Don't I just!" I said. "He's been coming here and looking through our windows and giggling ever since I can remember! He lives on the Worm Reserve in a shack. Mother says he's a bit wrong in the head, but no one's locked him up because he's so good at managing dragons."

There! I thought. That'll show them you can't trust a word Orm says! But they just nodded. Terens murmured to Alectis, "Sveridge worm, *Draco draco,* was adopted as the symbol of the Dragonate—"

"We *have* all heard of dragons," Palino said to him nastily.

Lewin cut in again. I suppose it was his job as presiding Updriten. "Siglin. Orm, in his deposition, refers to an incident in the Worm Reserve last Friday. We want you to tell us what happened then, if anything."

Grim's teeth! I thought. I'd hoped they'd just ask me questions. You can nearly always get round questions without lying. And I'd no idea what Orm had said. "I don't usually go to the Dragon Reserve," I said, "because of being Mother's heir. When I was born, the Fortune Teller said the dragons would take me." I saw Renick and Palino exchange looks of contempt at our primitive customs. But Mother had in a good Teller, and I believe it enough to keep away from the Reserve.

"So why did you go last Friday?" said Lewin.

"Neal dared me to," I said. I couldn't say anything else with a lie detector in my hands. Neal gets on with Orm, and he goes to the Reserve a lot. Up to Friday, he thought I was being silly refusing to go. But the real trouble was that Neal had been there all along, riding Barra beside

me on Nellie, and now Lewin had made me mention Neal, I couldn't think how to pretend he hadn't been there. "I rode up behind Wormhill," I said, "and then over the Saddle until we could see the sea. That means you're in the Reserve."

"Isn't the Reserve fenced off at all?" Renick asked disapprovingly.

"No," I said. "Worms—dragons—can fly, so what's the point? They stay in because the shepherds bombard them if they don't, and we all give them so many sheep every month." And Orm makes them stay in, bad cess to him! "Anyway," I said, "I was riding down a kyle—that's what we call those narrow stony valleys—when my horse reared and threw me. Next thing I knew—"

"Question," said Palino. "Where was your brother at this point?"

He *would* spot that! I thought. "Some way behind," I said. Six feet, in fact. Barra is used to dragons and just stood stock-still. "This dragon shuffled head down with its great snout across the kyle," I said. "I sat on the ground with its great amused eye staring at me and listened to Nellie clattering away up the kyle. It was a youngish one, sort of brown-green, which is why I hadn't seen it. They can keep awfully still when they want to. And I said a rude word to it.

" 'That's no way to speak to a dragon!' Orm said. He was sitting on a rock on the other side of the kyle, quite close, laughing at me." I wondered whether to fill the gap in the story where Neal was by telling them that Orm always used to be my idea of Jack Frost when I was little. He used to call at Uplands for milk then, to feed dragon fledglings on, but he was so rude to Mother that he goes to Inga's place now. Orm is long and skinny and brown, with a great white bush of hair and beard, and he smells rather. But they must have smelt him in Holmstad, so I said, "I was scared, because the dragon was so near I could feel the heat off it. And then Orm said, 'You have to speak politely to this dragon. He's my particular friend. You give me a nice kiss, and he'll let you go.' "

I think Lewin murmured something like, "Ah, I thought it might be that!" but it may just have been in his mind. I don't know because I was in real trouble then, trying to pick my way through without mentioning Neal. The little box got so wet it nearly slipped out of my hand. I said, "Every time I tried to get up, Orm beckoned, and the dragon pushed me down with its snout with a gamesome look in its eye. And Orm cackled with laughter. They were both really having fun." This was true, but the dragon also pushed between me and Neal and mantled its wings when Neal tried to help. And Neal said some pretty awful things to Orm. Orm giggled and insulted Neal back. He called Neal a booby who couldn't stand up for himself against women. "Then," I said, "then Orm said I was the

image of Mother at the same age—which isn't true: I'm bigger all over—and he said, 'Come on, kiss and be friends!' Then he skipped down from his rock and took hold of my arm—"

I had to stop and swallow there. The really awful thing was that, as soon as Orm had hold of me, I got a strong picture from his mind: Orm kissing a pretty lady smaller than me, with another dragon, an older, blacker one, looking on from the background. And I recognised the lady as Mother, and I was absolutely disgusted.

"So I hit Orm and got up and ran away," I said. "And Orm shouted at me all the time I was running up the kyle and catching Nellie, but I took no notice."

"Question," said Renick. "What action did the dragon take?"

"They—they always chase you if you run, I'd heard," Alectis said shyly.

"And this one appears to have been trained to Orm's command," Palino said.

"It didn't chase me," I said. "It stayed with Orm." The reason was that neither of them could move. I still don't know what I did—I had a picture of myself leaning back inside my own head and swinging mighty blows, the way you do with a pickaxe—and Neal says the dragon went over like a cartload of potatoes and Orm fell flat on his back. But Orm could speak and he screamed after us that I'd killed the worm and I'd pay for it. But I was screaming too, at Neal, to keep away from me because I was heg. That was the thing that horrified me most. Before that I'd tried not to think I was. After all, for all I knew, everyone can read minds and get a book from the bookcase without getting up from their chair. And Neal told me to pull myself together and think what we were going to tell Mother. We decided to say that we'd met a dragon in the Reserve and I'd killed it and found out I was heg. I made Neal promise not to mention Orm. I couldn't bear even to think of Orm. And Mother was wonderfully understanding, and I really didn't realise that I'd put her in danger as well as Neal.

Lewin looked down at the recorder. "Dragons are a preserved species," he said. "Orm claims that you caused grievous bodily harm to a dragon in his care. What have you to say to that?"

"How could I?" I said. Oh I was scared. "It was nearly as big as this house."

Renick was on to that at once. "Query," he said. "Prevarication?"

"Obviously," said Palino, clicking away at his block.

"We haven't looked at that dragon yet," Terens said.

"We'll do that on our way back," Lewin said, sighing rather. "Siglin, I regret to say there is enough mismatch between your account and Orm's,

and enough odd activity on that brain-measure you hold in your hand, to warrant my taking you to Holmstad Command Centre for further examination. Be good enough to go with Terens and Alectis to the van and wait there while we complete our inquiries here."

I stood up. Everything seemed to drain out of me. I could lam them like I lammed that dragon, I thought. But Holmstad would only send a troop out to see why they hadn't come back. And I put my oldest dress on for nothing! I thought as I walked down the hallway with Terens and Alectis. The doors were all closed. Everyone had guessed. The van smelt of clean plastic and it was very warm and light because the roof was one big window. I sat between Terens and Alectis on the back seat. They pulled straps round us all—safety straps, but they made me feel a true prisoner.

After a while, Terens said, "You could sue Orm if the evidence doesn't hold up, you know." I think he was trying to be kind, but I couldn't answer.

After another while, Alectis said, "With respect, Driten, I think suspects should be told the truth about the so-called lie detector."

"Alectis, I didn't hear you say that," Terens said. He pretended to look out of the window, but he must have known I knew he had deliberately thought *lie detector* at me as he passed me the thing. They're told to. Dragonate think of everything. I sat and thought I'd never hated anything so much as I hated our kind, self-sacrificing Dragonate, and I tried to take a last look at the stony yard, tipped sideways on the hill, with our square stone house at the top of it. But it wouldn't register somehow.

Then the front door opened and the other three came out, bringing Neal with them. Behind them, the hall was full of our people, with Mother in front, just staring. I just stared too, while Palino opened the van door and shoved Neal into the seat beside me. "Your brother has admitted being present at the incident," he said as he strapped himself in beside Neal. I could tell he was pleased.

By this time, Lewin and Renick had strapped themselves into the front seat. Lewin drove away without a word. Neal looked back at the house. I couldn't. "Neal—?" I whispered.

"Just like you said," Neal said, loudly and defiantly. "Behaving as if they own the Ten Worlds. I wouldn't join now if they begged me to!" Why did I have to go and say that to him? "Why did *you* join?" Neal said rudely to Alectis.

"Six brothers," Alectis said, staring ahead.

The other four all started talking at once. Lewin asked Renick the quickest way to the Reserve by road and Renick said it was down through Wormstow. "I hope the dragons eat you!" Neal said. This was while Palino was leaning across us to say to Terens, "Where's our next inspection after

this hole?" And Terens said, "We go straight on to Arkloren on Nine. Alectis will get to see some other parts of the Manifold shortly." Behaving as if we didn't exist. Neal shrugged and shut up.

The Dragonate van was much smoother and faster than a farm van. We barely bounced over the stony track that loops down to Hillfoot, and it seemed no time before we were speeding down the better road, with the rounded yellowish Upland Hills peeling past on either side. I love my hills, covered with yellow ling that only grows here on Sveridge, and the soft light of the sun through our white and grey clouds. Renick, still making conversation, said he was surprised to find the hills so old and worn down. "I thought Eight was a close parallel with Seven!" he said.

Lewin answered in a boring voice, "I wouldn't know. I haven't seen Seven since I was a Cadet."

"Oh, the mountains are much higher and greener there," Renick said. "I was posted in Camberia for years. Lovely spot."

Lewin just grunted. Quite a wave of homesickness filled the van. I could feel Renick thinking of Seven and Alectis not wanting to go to Nine. Terens was remembering boating on Romaine when he was Neal's age. Lewin was thinking of Seven, in.spite of the grunt. We were coming over Jiot Fell already then, with the Giant Stones standing on top of the world against the sky. A few more turns in the road would bring us out above Wormstow where Neal and I went—used to go—to school. What about me? I was thinking. I'm homesick for life. And Neal. Poor Mother.

Then the air suddenly filled with noise, like the most gigantic sheet being torn.

Lewin said, "What the—?" and we all stared upwards. A great silvery shape screamed overhead. And another of a fatter shape, more blue than silver, screamed over after it, both of them only just inside the clouds. Alectis put up an astonished pointing arm. "Thraller! The one behind's a Slaver!"

"What's it doing *here?*" said Terens. "Someone must have slipped up."

"Ours was a stratoship!" said Palino. "What's going on?"

A huge ball of fire rolled into being on the horizon, above the Giant Stones. I felt Lewin slam on the brakes. "We got him!" one of them cried out.

"The Slaver got ours," Lewin said. The brakes were still yelling like a she-worm when the blast hit.

I lose the next bit. I start remembering again a few seconds later, sitting up straight with a bruised lip, finding the van round sideways a long way on down the road. In front of me, Renick's straps had broken. He was lying kind of folded against the windscreen. I saw Lewin pull himself up-

right and pull at Renick. And stop pulling quickly. My ears had gone deaf, because I could only hear Lewin as if he was very far off. "—hurt in the back?"

Palino looked along the four of us and shouted, "Fine! Is Renick—?"

"Dead," Lewin shouted back. "Neck broken." He was jiggling furiously at buttons in the controls. My ears started to work again and I heard him say, "Holmstad's not answering. Nor's Ranefell. I'm going back to Holmstad. Fast."

We set off again with a roar. The van seemed to have lost its silencer and it rattled all over, but it went. And how it went. We must have done nearly a hundred down Jiot, squealing on the bends. In barely minutes, we could see Wormstow spread out below, old grey houses and new white ones, and all those imported trees that make the town so pretty. The clouds over the houses seemed to darken and go dense.

"Uh-oh!" said Terens.

The van jolted to another yelling stop. It was not the clouds. Something big and dark was coming down through the clouds, slowly descending over Wormstow. Something enormous. "What *is* that?" Neal and Alectis said together.

"Hedgehog," said Terens.

"A slaveship," Palino explained, sort of mincing the word out to make it mean more. "Are—are we out of range here?"

"I most thoroughly hope so," Lewin said. "There's not much we can do with hand weapons."

We sat and stared as the thing came down. The lower it got, the more Renick's bent-up shape was in my way. I kept wishing Lewin would do something about him, but nobody seemed to be able to think of anything but that huge descending ship. I saw why they call them hedgehogs. It was rounded above and flat beneath, with bits and pieces sticking out all over like bristles. Hideous somehow. And it came and hung squatting over the roofs of the houses below. There it let out a ramp like a long black tongue, right down into the Market Square. Then another into High Street, between the rows of trees, breaking a tree as it passed.

As soon as the ramps touched ground, Lewin started the van and drove down towards Wormstow.

"No, stop!" I said, even though I knew he couldn't. The compulsion those Slavers put out is really strong. Some of it shouts inside your head, like your own conscience through an amplifier, and some of it is gentle and creeping and insidious, like Mother telling you gently to come along now and be sensible. I found I was thinking, Oh well, I'm sure Lewin's right. Tears rolled down Alectis's face, and Neal was sniffing. We had to go to the ship, which was now hanging a little above us. I could see

people hurrying out of houses and racing to crowd up the ramp in the Market Square. People I knew. So it must be all right, I thought. The van was having to weave past loose horses that people had been riding or driving. That was how I got a glimpse of the other ramp, through trees and the legs of a horse. Soldiers were pouring down it, running like a muddy river, in waves. Each wave had a little group of kings, walking behind it, directing the soldiers. They had shining crowns and shining Vs on their chests and walked mighty, like gods.

That brought me to my senses. "Lewin," I said. "Those are Thrallers and you're *not* to do what they say, do you hear?" Lewin just drove round a driverless cart, towards the Market Square. He was going to be driving up that ramp in a second. I was so frightened then that I lammed Lewin—not like I lammed the dragon, but in a different way. Again it's hard to describe, except that this time I was giving orders. Lewin was to obey *me,* not the Thrallers, and my orders were to drive away *at once.* When nothing seemed to happen, I got so scared that I seemed to be filling the whole van with my orders.

"Thank you," Lewin said, in a croaking sort of voice. He jerked the van round into Worm Parade and roared down it, away from the ship and the terrible ramps. The swerve sent the van door open with a slam and, to my relief, the body of poor Renick tumbled out into the road.

But everyone else screamed out, "No! What are you doing?" and clutched their heads. The compulsion was far, far worse if you disobeyed. I felt as if layers of my brain were being peeled off with hot pincers. Neal was crying, like Alectis. Terens was moaning. It hurt so much that I filled the van frantically with more and more orders. Lewin made grinding sounds, deep in his throat, and kept on driving away, with the door flapping and banging.

Palino took his straps undone and yelled, "You're going the wrong way, you damn cariarder!" I couldn't stop him at all. He started to climb into the front seat to take the controls away from Lewin. Alectis and Neal both rose up too and shoved him off Lewin. So Palino gave that up and scrambled for the open flapping door instead. Nobody could do a thing. He just jumped out and went rolling in the road. I didn't see what he did then, because I was too busy giving orders, but Neal says he simply scrambled up and staggered back towards the ship and the ramp.

We drove for another horrible half-mile, and then we must have got out of range. Everything suddenly went easy. It was like when somebody lets go the other end of a rope you're both pulling, and you go over backwards. Wham. And I felt too dim and stunned to move.

"Thank the gods!" I heard Terens more or less howl.

"It's Siglin you should be thanking," Lewin said. "Alectis, climb over to the front and shut that door. Then try and raise Holmstad again."

Neal says the door was too battered to shut. Alectis had to hold it with one hand while he worked the broadcaster with the other. I heard him saying that Holmstad still didn't answer through the roaring and rattling the van made when Lewin put on speed up the long looping gradient of Wormjiot. We hadn't nearly got up to the Saddle, when Terens said, "It's going! Aren't they quick!" I looked back, still feeling dim and horrible, in time to see the squatting hedgehog rise up inside the clouds again.

"Now you can thank the gods," Lewin said. "They didn't think we were worth chasing. Try medium wave, Alectis." There is an outcrop of ragged rock near the head of Wormjiot. Lewin drove off the road and stopped behind it while Alectis fiddled with knobs.

Instead of getting dance music and cookery hints, Alectis got a voice that fizzed and crackled. "This is Dragonate Fanejiot, Sveridge South, with an emergency message for all Dragonate units still in action. You are required to make your way to Fanejiot and report there soonest." It said that about seven times, then it said, "We can now confirm earlier reports that Home Nine is in Slaver hands. Here is a list of bases on Home Eight that have been taken by Slavers." It was a long list. Holmstad came quite early on it, and Ranefell about ten names after that.

Lewin reached across and turned it off. "Did someone say we slipped up?" he said. "That was an understatement."

"Fanejiot is two thousand flaming miles from here!" Terens said. "With an ocean and who knows how many Slavers in between!"

"Well put," said Lewin. "Did Palino's memo block go to the Slavers with him?"

It was lying on the back seat beside Neal. Neal tried to pretend it wasn't, but Alectis turned round and grabbed it as Neal tried to shove it on the floor. I was lying back in my straps, feeling grey and thinking, We could get away now. I'd better lam them all again. But all I did was lie there and watch Neal and Alectis having an angry tug-of-war. Then watch Lewin turn round and pluck the block away from the pair of them.

"Don't be a fool," he said to Neal. "I've already erased the recorder. And if I hadn't had Renick and Palino breathing righteously down our necks, I'd never have recorded anything. It goes against the grain to take in children."

Lewin pressed the *erase* on the memo block and it gave out a satisfied sort of gobble. Neither of the other two said anything, but I could feel Alectis thinking how much he had always hated Palino. Terens was

looking down at Wormstow through a fieldglass and trying not to remember a boy in Cadets with him who had turned heg and given himself up. I felt I wanted to say thank you. But I was too shy to do anything but sit up and look at Wormstow too, between the jags of the rock. Even without a fieldglass, I could see the place throbbing like a broken anthill with all the Slaver troops.

"Getting ready to move out and mop up the countryside," Terens said.

"Yes, and that's where most people live," Lewin said. "Farms and holdings in the hills. What's the quickest way to the Dragon Reserve?"

"There's a track on the right round the next bend," said Neal. "Why?"

"Because it's the safest place I can think of," Lewin said.

Neal and I looked at one another. You didn't need to be heg to tell that Neal was thinking, just as I was, that this was a bit much. They were supposed to help all those people in the holdings. Instead, they thought of the safest place and ran there! So neither of us said that the track was only a bridle path, and we didn't try to warn them not to take the van into the Reserve. We just sat there while Lewin drove it uphill, and then lumping and bumping and rattling up the path. The path gave out in the marshy patch below the Saddle, but Lewin kept grinding and roaring on, throwing up peat in squirts, until we tipped downhill again and bounced down a yellow fellside. We were in the Reserve by then. The ling was growing in lurid green patches, black at the roots, where dragons had burnt it in the mating season. They fight a lot then.

We got some way into the Reserve. The van gave out clanging sounds and smelt bad, but Lewin kept it going by driving on the most level parts. We were in a wide stony scoop, with yellow hills all round, when the smell got worse and the van just stopped. Alectis let go of the door. "Worms—dragons," he said, "don't like machines, I've heard."

"Now he tells us!" said Terens, and we all got out. We all looked as if we had been in an accident—I mean, I know we had in a way, but we looked worse than I'd expected: sort of ragged and pale and shivery. Lewin turned his foot on a stone, which made him clutch his chest and swear. Neither of the other two even asked if he was all right. That is the Dragonate way. They just set out walking. Neal and I went with them, thinking of the best place to dodge off up a kyle, so that we could run home and try and warn Mother about the Slavers.

"Where that bog turns into a stream—I'll say when," Neal was whispering, when a dragon came over the hill into the valley and made straight for us.

"Stand still!" said Alectis. Lewin and Terens each had a gun in their hand without seeming to have moved. Alectis didn't, and he was white.

"They only eat moving prey," Neal said, because he was sorry for him. "Make sure not to panic and run and you're fine."

I was sorry for Alectis too, so I added, "It's probably only after the van. They love metal."

Lewin crumpled his face at me and said "Ah!" for some reason.

The dragon came quite slowly, helping itself with its spread wings and hanging its head rather. It was a bad colour, sort of creamy through the brown-green. I thought it might be one of the sick ones that turn man-eater, and I tried to brace myself and stop feeling so tired and shaky so that I could lam it. But Neal said, "That's Orm's dragon! You didn't kill it after all!"

It *was* Orm's dragon. By this time, it was near enough for me to see the heat off it quivering the air, and I recognised the gamesome, shrewd look in its eye. But since it had every reason to hate me, that didn't make me feel much better. It came straight for me too. We all stood like statues. And it came right up to me and bent its neck, and laid its huge brown head on the ling in front of my feet, where it puffed out a sigh that made Lewin cough and gasp another swearword. It had felt me coming, the dragon said, and it was here to say sorry. It hadn't meant to upset me. It had thought it was a game.

That made me feel terrible. "I'm sorry too," I said. "I lost my head. I didn't mean to hurt you. That was Orm's fault."

Orm was only playing too, the dragon said. Orm called him Huffle, and I could too if I liked. Was he forgiven? He was ashamed.

"Of course I forgive you, Huffle," I said. "Do you forgive me?"

Yes. Huffle lifted his head up and went a proper colour at once. Dragons are like people that way.

"Ask him to fetch Orm here," Lewin said urgently.

I didn't want to see Orm, and Lewin was a coward. "Ask him yourself," I said. "He understands."

"Yes, but I don't think he'd do it for me," Lewin said.

"Then, will you fetch Orm for Lewin?" I asked Huffle.

He gave me a cheeky look. Maybe. Presently. He sauntered away past Terens, who moved his head back from Huffle's rattling right wing, looking as if he thought his last hour had come, and went to have a look at the van. He put out a great clawed foot, in a thoughtful sort of way, and tore the loose door off it. Then he tucked the door under his right front foreleg and departed, deliberately slowly, on three legs, helping himself with his wings, so that rocks rattled and flapped all along the valley.

Alectis sat down rather suddenly. But Lewin made him leap up again and help Terens get the broadcaster out of the van before any more dragons found it. They never did get it out. They were still working and wag-

gling at it to get it loose, and Lewin was standing over Neal and me, so that we couldn't sneak off, when we heard that humming kind of whistle that you get from a dragon in flight. We whirled round. This dragon was a big black one, coasting low over the hill opposite and gliding down the valley. They don't often fly high. It came to ground with that grinding of stones and leathery slap of wings closing that always tells you a dragon is landing. It arched its black neck and looked at us disdainfully.

Orm was sitting on its back looking equally disdainful. It was one of those times when Orm looks grave and grand. He sat very upright, with his hair and beard combed straight by the wind of flying, and his big pale eyes hardly looked mad at all. Neal was the only one of us he deigned to notice. "Good afternoon, Neal Sigridsson," he said. "You keep bad company. Dragonate are not human."

Neal was very angry with Orm. He put my heart in my mouth by saying, quite calmly, "Then in that case, I'm the only human here." With that dragon standing glaring! I've been brought up to despise boys, but I think that is a mistake.

To my relief, Orm just grinned. "That's the way, boy," he said. "Not a booby after all, are you?"

Then Lewin took my breath away by going right up to the dragon. He had his gun, of course, but that wouldn't have been much use against a dragon. He went so near that the dragon had to turn its head out of his way. "We've dropped the charges," he said. "And you should never have brought them."

Orm looked down at him. "You," he said, "know a thing or two."

"I know dragons don't willingly attack humans," Lewin said. "I always read up on a case before I hear it." At this, Orm put on his crazy look and made his mad cackle. "Stop that!" said Lewin. "The Slavers have invaded. Wormstow's full of Slaver troops and we need your help. I want to get everyone from the outlying farms into the Reserve and persuade the dragons to protect them. Can you help us do that?"

That took my breath away again, and Neal's too. We did a quick goggle at one another. Perhaps the Dragonate was like it was supposed to be after all!

Orm said, "Then we'd better get busy," and slid down from the dragon. He still towered over Lewin. Orm is huge. As soon as he was down, the black dragon lumbered across to the van and started taking it to bits. That brought other dragons coasting whistling in from all sides of the valley, to crunch to earth and hurry to the van too. In seconds, it was surrounded in black and green-brown shapes the size of haybarns. And Orm talked, at the top of his voice, through the sound of metal tearing, and big claws screaming on iron, and wings clapping, and angry grunts

when two dragons happened to get hold of the same piece of van. Orm always talks a lot. But this time, he was being particularly garrulous, to give the dragons time to lumber away with their pieces of van, hide them and come back. "They won't even do what Orm says until they've got their metal," I whispered to Terens, who got rather impatient with Orm.

Orm said the best place to put people was the high valley at the centre of the Reserve. "There's an old she-drake with a litter just hatched," he said. "No one will get past her when she's feared for her young. I'll speak to her. But the rest are to promise me she's not disturbed." As for telling everyone at the farms where to come, Orm said the dragons could do that, provided Lewin could think of a way of sending a message by them. "You see, most folk can't hear a dragon when it speaks," he said. "And some who can hear—" with a nasty look at me—"speak back to wound." He was still very angry with me. I kept on the other side of Terens and Alectis when the dragons all came swooping back.

Terens set the memo block to *repeat* and tapped out an official message from Lewin. Then he tore off page after page with the same thing on it. Orm handed each page to a dragon, saying things like, "Take this to the fat cow up at Hillfoot." Or, "Drop this on young vinegar lady at Crowtop—hard." Or, "This is for Dopey at High Jiot, but don't give it her, give it to her youngest husband or they'll never get moving."

Some of the things he said made me laugh a lot. But it was only when Alectis asked what was so funny and Neal kicked my ankle, that I realised I was the only one who could hear the things Orm said. Each dragon, as it got its page, ran down the valley and took off, showering us with stones from the jump they gave to get higher in the air than usual. Their wings boom when they fly high. Orm took off on the black dragon last of all, saying he would go and warn the she-drake.

Lewin crumpled his face ruefully at the few bits of van remaining, and we set off to walk to the valley ourselves. It was a long way. Over ling slopes and up among boulders in the kyles we trudged, looking up nervously every so often when fat bluish Slaver fliers screamed through the clouds overhead. After a while, our dragons began booming overhead too, seawards to roost. Terens counted them and said every one we had sent seemed to have come back now. He said he wished he had wings. It was sunset by the time we reached the valley. By that time, Lewin was bent over, holding his chest and swearing every other step. But everyone was still pretending, in that stupid Dragonate way, that he was all right. We came up on the cliffs, where the kyle winds down to the she-drake's valley, and there was the sunset lighting the sea and the towers of rock out there, and the waves crashing round the rocks, where the young dragons were flying to roost—and Lewin actually pretended to admire the view.

"I knew a place like this on Seven," he said. "Except there were trees instead of dragons. I can't get used to the way Eight doesn't have trees."

He was going to sit down to rest, I think, but Orm came up the kyle just then. Huffle was hulking behind him. "So you got here at last!" Orm said in his rudest way.

"We have," said Lewin. "Now would you mind telling me what you were playing at bringing those charges against Siglin?"

"You should be glad I did. You'd all be in a slaveship now if I hadn't," Orm said.

"But you weren't to know that, were you?" Terens said.

"Not to speak of risking being charged yourself," added Lewin.

Orm leant on his hand against Huffle, like you might against a wall. "She half killed this dragon!" he said. "That's why! All I did was ask her for a kiss and she screams and lays into poor Huffle. My own daughter, and she tries to kill a dragon! And I thought, Right, my lady, then you're no daughter of mine any more! And I flew Huffle's mother straight into Holmstad and laid charges. I was that angry! My own father tended dragons, and his mother before him. And my daughter tried to kill one! You wonder I was angry?"

"Nobody *told* me!" I said. I had that draining-away feeling again. I was quite glad when Terens took hold of my elbow and said something like, "Steady, steady!"

"Are you telling the truth?" Neal said.

"I'm sure he is," Lewin said. "Your sister has his eyes."

"Ask Timas," said Orm. "He married your mother the year after I did. He can take being bossed about. I can't. I went back to my dragons. But I suppose there's a record of that?" he said challengingly to Lewin.

"And the divorce," said Lewin. "Terens looked it up for me. But I expect the Slavers have destroyed it by now."

"And she never told you?" Orm said to me. He wagged his shaggy eyebrows at me almost forgivingly. "I'll have a bone to pick with her over that," he said.

Mother arrived just as we'd all got down into the valley. She looked very indomitable, as she always does on horseback, and all our people were with her, down to both our shepherds. They had carts of clothes and blankets and food. Mother knew the valley as well as Orm did. She used to meet Orm there when she was a girl. She set out for the Reserve as soon as she heard the broadcast about the invasion, and the dragon we sent her met them on the way. That's Mother for you. The rest of the neighbours didn't get there for some hours after that.

I didn't think Mother's face—or Timas's—could hold such a mixture of feelings as they did when they saw Neal and me and the Dragonate

men all with Orm. When Orm saw Mother, he folded his arms and grinned. Huffle rested his huge chin on Orm's shoulder, looking interested.

"Here she comes," Orm said to Huffle. "Oh, I do love a good quarrel!"

They had one. It was one of the loudest I'd ever heard. Terens took Neal and me away to help look after Lewin. He turned out to have broken some ribs when the blast hit the van, but he wouldn't let anyone look even until I ordered him to. After that, Neal, Alectis and I sat under our haycart and talked, mostly about the irony of Fate. You see, Neal has always secretly wished Fate had given him Orm as a father, and I'm the one that's got Orm. Neal's father is Timas. Alectis says he can see the likeness. We'd both gladly swap. Then Alectis confessed that he'd been hating the Dragonate so much that he was thinking of running away—which is a serious crime. But now the Slavers have come, and there doesn't seem to be much of a Dragonate any more, he feels quite different. He admires Lewin.

Lewin consented to rest while Terens and Mother organised everyone into a makeshift camp in the valley, but he was up and about again the next day, because he said the Slavers were bound to come the day after, when they found the holdings were deserted. The big black she-drake sat in her cave at the head of the kyle, with her infants between her forefeet, watching groups of people rushing round to do what Lewin said, and didn't seem to mind at all. Huffle said she'd been bored and bad-tempered up to then. We made life interesting. Actually that she-drake reminds me of Mother. Both of them made me give them a faithful report of the battle.

I don't think the Slavers knew about the dragons. They just knew that there was a concentration of people in here, and they came straight across the Reserve to get us. As soon as the dragons told Orm they were coming, Lewin had us all out hiding in the hills in their path, except for Mother and Timas and Inga's mother and a few more who had shotguns. They had to stay and guard the little kids in the camp. The rest of us had any weapon we could find. Neal and Alectis had bows and arrows. Inga had her airgun. Donal and most of the farmers had scythes. The shepherds all had their slingshots. I was in the front with Lewin, because I was supposed to stop the effect of the Slavers' collars. Orm was there too, although nobody had ever admitted in so many words that Orm might be heg. All Orm did was to ask the dragons to keep back, because we didn't want *them* enslaved by those collars.

And there they came, a huddle of sheep-like troops, and then another huddle, each one being driven by a cluster of kingly Slavers, with crowns and winking V-shaped collars. And there again we all got that

horrible guilty compulsion to come and give ourselves up. But I don't think those collars have any effect on dragons. Half of us were standing up to walk into the Slavers' arms, and I was ordering them as hard as I could not to, when the dragons smelt those golden crowns and collars. There was no holding them. They just whirred down over our heads and took those Slavers to pieces for the metal. Lewin said, "Ah!" and crumpled his face in a grin like a fiend's. He'd thought the dragons might do that. I think he may really be a genius, like they say Camerati are. But I was so sick at that, and then again at the sight of nice people like Alectis and Yan killing the sheeplike troops, that I'm not going to talk about it any more. Terens says I'm not to go when the Slavers come next. Apparently I broadcast the way I was feeling, just like the Slavers do, and even the dragons felt queasy. The she-drake snorted at that. Mother says, "Nonsense. Take travel pills and behave as my daughter should."

Anyway, we have found out how to beat the Slavers. We have no idea what is going on in the other of the Ten Worlds, or even in the rest of Sveridge, but there are fifty more Worm Reserves around the world, and Lewin says there must be stray Dragonate units too who might think of using dragons against Slavers. We want to move out and take over some of the farms again soon. The dragons are having far too much fun with the sheep. They keep flying over with woolly bundles dangling from their claws, watched by a gloomy crowd of everyone's shepherds. "Green dot," the shepherds say. "The brutes are raiding Hightop now." They are very annoyed with Orm, because Orm just gives his mad cackle and lets the dragons go on.

Orm isn't mad at all. He's afraid of people knowing he's heg—he still won't admit he is. I think that's why he left Mother and Mother doesn't admit she was ever married to him. Not that Mother minds. I get the feeling she and Orm understand one another rather well. But Mother married Donal, you see, after Timas. Donal, and Yan too, have both told me that the fact that I'm heg makes no difference to them—but you should see the way they both look at me! I'm not fooled. I don't blame Orm for being scared stiff Donal would find out he was heg. But I'm not sure I shall ever like Orm, all the same.

I am putting all this down on what is left of Palino's memo block. Lewin wanted me to, in case there is still some History yet to come. He has made his official version on the recorder. I'm leaning the block on Huffle's forefoot. Huffle is my friend now. Leaning on a dragon is the best way to keep warm on a chilly evening like this, when you're forced to camp out in the Reserve. Huffle is letting Lewin lean on him too, beyond Neal, because Lewin's ribs still pain him. There is a lot of leaning-space

along the side of a dragon. Orm has just stepped across Huffle's tail, into the light, chortling and rubbing his hands in his most irritating way.

"Your mother's on the warpath," he says. "Oh, I do love a good quarrel!"

And here comes Mother, ominously upright, and with her arms folded. It's not Orm she wants. It's Lewin. "Listen, you," she says. "What the dickens is the Dragonate thinking of, beheading hegs all these years? They can't help what they are. And they're the only people who can stand up to the Thrallers."

Orm is cheated of his quarrel. Lewin looked up, crumpled into the most friendly smile. "I do so agree with you," he said. "I've just said so in my report. And I'd have got your daughter off somehow, you know."

Orm is cackling like the she-drake's young ones. Mother's mouth is open and I really think that, for once in her life, she has no idea what to say.

The Master

This is the trouble with being a newly qualified vet. The call came at 5:50 A.M. I thought it was a man's voice, though it was high for a man, and I didn't quite catch the name—Harry Sanovit? Harrison Ovett? Anyway, he said it was urgent.

Accordingly, I found myself on the edge of a plain, facing a dark fir forest. It was about midmorning. The fir trees stood dark and evenly spaced, exhaling their crackling gummy scent, with vistas of trodden-looking pine needles beneath them. A wolfwood, I thought. I was sure that thought was right. The spacing of the trees was so regular that it suggested an artificial pinewood in the zoo, and there was a kind of humming, far down at the edges of the senses, as if machinery was at work sustaining a man-made environment here. The division between trees and plain was so sharp that I had some doubts that I would be able to enter the wood.

But I stepped inside with no difficulty. Under the trees it was cooler, more strongly scented, and full of an odd kind of depression, which made me sure that there was some sort of danger here. I walked on the carpet of needles cautiously, relaxed but intensely afraid. There seemed to be some kind of path winding between the straight boles and I followed it into the heart of the wood. After a few turns, flies buzzed around something just off the path. *Danger!* pricked out all over my skin like sweat, but I went and looked all the same.

It was a young woman about my own age. From the flies and the freshness, I would have said she had been killed only hours ago. Her throat had been torn out. The expression on her half-averted face was of sheer terror. She had glorious red hair and was wearing what looked, improbably, to be evening dress.

I backed away, swallowing. As I backed, something came up beside me. I whirled around with a croak of terror.

"No need to fear," he said. "I am only the fool."

He was very tall and thin and ungainly. His feet were in big, laced boots, jigging a silent, ingratiating dance on the pine needles, and the

rest of his clothes were dull brown and close fitting. His huge hands came out to me placatingly. "I am Egbert," he said. "You may call me Eggs. You will take no harm if you stay with me." His eyes slid off mine apologetically, round and blue-grey. He grinned all over his small, inane face. Under his close crop of straw-fair hair, his face was indeed that of a near-idiot. He did not seem to notice the woman's corpse at all, even though he seemed to know I was full of horror.

"What's going on here?" I asked him helplessly. "I'm a vet, not a—not a—mortician. What animal needs me?"

He smiled seraphically at nothing over my left shoulder. "I am only Eggs, Lady. I don't not know nothing. What you need to do is call the Master. Then you will know."

"So where is the Master?" I said.

He looked baffled by this question. "Hereabouts," he suggested. He gave another beguiling smile, over my right shoulder this time, panting slightly. "He will come if you call him right. Will I show you the house, Lady? There are rare sights there."

"Yes, if you like," I said. Anything to get away from whatever had killed that girl. Besides, I trusted him somehow. The way he had said I would take no harm if I was with him had been said in a way I believed.

He turned and cavorted up the path ahead of me, skipping soundlessly on his great feet, waving great, gangling arms, clumsily tripping over a tree root and, even more clumsily, just saving himself. He held his head on one side and hummed as he went, happy and harmless. That is to say, harmless to me so far. Though he walked like a great, hopping puppet, those huge hands were certainly strong enough to rip a throat out.

"Who killed that girl?" I asked him. "Was it the Master?"

His head snapped around, swayingly, and he stared at me, appalled, balancing the path as though it were a tightrope. "Oh, no, Lady. The Master wouldn't not do that!" He turned sadly, almost tearfully, away.

"I'm sorry," I said.

His head bent, acknowledging that he had heard, but he continued to walk the tightrope of the path without answering, and I followed. As I did, I was aware that there was something moving among the trees to either side of us. Something softly kept pace with us there, and, I was sure, something also followed along the path behind. I did not try to see what it was. I was quite as much angry with myself as I was scared. I had let my shock at seeing that corpse get the better of my judgment. I saw I must wait to find out how the red-headed girl had gotten herself killed. Caution! I said to myself. Caution! This path was a tightrope indeed.

"Has the Master got a name?" I asked.

That puzzled Eggs. He stood balancing on the path to think. After a moment he nodded doubtfully, shot me a shy smile over his shoulder, and walked on. No attempt to ask my name, I noticed. As if I was the only other person there and "Lady" should be enough. Which meant that the presences among the trees and behind on the path were possibly not human.

Around the next bend, I found myself facing the veranda of a chaletlike building. It looked a little as if it were made of wood, but it was no substance that I knew. Eggs tripped on the step and floundered toward the door at the back of the veranda. Before I could make more than a move to help him, he had saved himself and his great hands were groping with an incomprehensible lock on the door. The humming was more evident here. I had been hoping that what I had heard at the edge of the wood had been the flies on the corpse. It was not. Though the sound was still not much more than a vibration at the edge of the mind, I knew I had been right in my first idea. Something artificial was being maintained here, and whatever was maintaining it seemed to be under this house.

In this house, I thought, as Eggs got the door open and floundered inside ahead of me. The room we entered was full of—well, devices. The nearest thing was a great cauldron, softly bubbling for no reason I could see, and giving out a gauzy violet light. The other things were arranged in ranks beyond, bewilderingly. In one place something grotesque stormed green inside a design painted on the floor; here a copper bowl smoked; there a single candle sat like something holy on a white stone; a knife suspended in air dripped gently into a jar of rainbow glass. Much of it was glass, twinkling, gleaming, chiming, under the light from the low ceiling that seemed to come from nowhere. There were no windows.

"Good heavens!" I said, disguising my dismay as amazement. "What are all these?"

Eggs grinned. "I know some. Pretty, aren't they?" He roved, surging about, touching the edge of a pattern here, passing his huge hand though a flame or a column of smoke there, causing a shower of fleeting white stars, solemn gong notes, and a rich smell of incense. "Pretty, aren't they?" he kept repeating, and, "*Very* pretty!" as an entire fluted glass structure began to ripple and change shape at the end of the room. As it changed, the humming which was everywhere in the room changed, too. It became a purring chime, and I felt an indescribable pulling-feeling from the roots of my hair and under my skin, almost as if the glass thing were trying to change me as it changed itself.

"I should come away from that if I were you," I said as firmly and calmly as I could manage.

Eggs turned and came floundering toward me, grinning eagerly. To my relief, the sound from the glass modulated to a new kind of humming. But my relief vanished when Eggs said, "Petra knew all, before Annie tore her throat out. Do you know as much as Petra? You are clever, Lady, as well as beautiful." His eyes slid across me, respectfully. Then he turned and hung, lurching, over the cauldron with the gauzy violet light. "Petra took pretty dresses from here," he said. "Would you like for me to get you a pretty dress?"

"Not at the moment, thank you," I said, trying to sound kind. As I said, Eggs was not necessarily harmless. "Show me the rest of the house," I said, to distract him.

He fell over his feet to oblige. "Come. See here." He led me to the side of the devices, where there was a clear passage and some doors. At the back of the room was another door, which slid open by itself as we came near. Eggs giggled proudly at that, as if it were his doing. Beyond was evidently a living room. The floor here was soft, carpetlike, and blue. Darker blue blocks hung about, mysteriously half a meter or so in the air. Four of them were a meter or so square. The fifth was two meters each way. They had the look of a suite of chairs and a sofa to me. A squiggly mural-thing occupied one wall and the entire end wall was window, which seemed to lead to another veranda, beyond which I could see a garden of some kind. "The room is pretty, isn't it?" Eggs asked anxiously. "I like the room."

I assured him I liked the room. This relieved him. He stumbled around a floating blue block, which was barely disturbed by his falling against it, and pressed a plate in the wall beyond. The long glass of the window slid back, leaving the room open to the veranda. He turned to me, beaming.

"Clever," I said, and made another cautious attempt to find out more. "Did Petra show you how to open that, or was it the Master?"

He was puzzled again. "I don't not know," he said, worried about it.

I gave up and suggested we go into the garden. He was pleased. We went over the veranda and down steps into a rose garden. It was an oblong shape, carved out from among the fir trees, about fifteen meters from the house to the bushy hedge at the far end. And it was as strange as everything else. The square of sky overhead was subtly the wrong colour, as if you were seeing it through sunglasses. It made the colour of the roses rich and too dark. I walked through it with a certainty that it was being maintained—or created—by one of the devices in that windowless room.

The roses were all standards, each planted in a little circular bed. The head of each was about level with my head. No petals fell on the gravel-seeming paths. I kept exclaiming, because these were the most per-

fect roses I ever saw, whether full bloom, bud, or overblown. When I saw an orange rose—the colour I love most—I put my hand up cautiously to make sure that it was real. It was. While my fingers lingered on it I happened to glance at Eggs, towering over me. It was just a flick of the eyes, which I don't think he saw. He was standing there, smiling as always, staring at me intently. There was, I swear, another shape to his face and it was not the shape of an idiot. But it was not the shape of a normal man, either. It was an intent, *hunting* face.

Next moment he was surging inanely forward. "I will pick you a rose, Lady." He reached out and stumbled as he reached. His hand caught a thorn in a tumble of petals. He snatched it back with a yelp. "Oh!" he said. "It hurts!" He lifted his hand and stared at it. Blood was running down the length of his little finger.

"Suck it," I said. "Is the thorn still in it?"

"I don't know," Eggs said helplessly. Several drops of blood had fallen among the fallen petals before he took my advice and sucked the cut, noisily. As he did so, his other hand came forward to bar my way. "Stay by me, Lady," he said warningly.

I had already stopped dead. Whether they had been there all along or had been summoned, materialised, by the scent of blood, I still do not know, but they were there now, against the hedge at the end of the garden, all staring at me. Three Alsatian dogs, I told myself foolishly and knew it was nonsense as I thought it. Three of them. Three wolves. Each of them must have been, in bulk if not in height, at least as big as I was.

They were dark in the curious darkness of that garden. Their eyes were the easiest to see, light wolf-green. All of them staring at me, staring earnestly, hungrily. The smaller two were crouched in front. One of those was brindled and larger and rangier than his browner companion. And these two were only small by comparison with the great black she-wolf standing behind with slaver running from her open jaws. She was poised either to pounce or to run away. I have never seen anything more feral than that black she-wolf. But they were all feral, stiff legged, terrified, half in mind to tear my throat out, and yet they were held there for some reason, simply staring. All three were soundlessly snarling, even before I spoke.

My horror—caught from the wolves to some extent—was beyond thought and out into a dreamlike state, where I simply knew that Eggs was right when he said I would be safe with him, and so I said what the dream seemed to require. "Eggs," I said, "tell me their names."

Eggs was quite unperturbed. His hand left his mouth and pointed at the brindled wolf in front. "That one is Hugh, Lady. Theo is the one beside him. She standing at the back is Annie."

So now I knew what had torn red-headed Petra's throat out. And what kind of a woman was she, I wondered, who must have had Eggs as servant and a roomful of strange devices, and on top of this gave three wild beasts these silly names? My main thought was that I did not want my throat torn out, too. And I had been called here as a vet after all. It took quite an effort to look those three creatures over professionally, but I did so. Ribs showed under the curly brownish coat of Theo. Hugh's haunches stuck out like knives. As for Annie standing behind, her belly clung upward almost to her backbone. "When did they last eat?" I said.

Eggs smiled at me. "There is food in the forest for them, Lady."

I stared at him, but he seemed to have no idea what he was saying. It was to the wolves' credit that they did not seem to regard dead Petra as food, but from the look of them it would not be long before they did so. "Eggs," I said, "these three are starving. You and I must go back into the house and find food for them."

Eggs seemed much struck by this idea. "Clever," he said. "I am only the fool, Lady." And as I turned, gently, not to alarm the wolves, he stretched out his hands placatingly—at least, it looked placating, but it was quite near to an attempt to take hold of me, a sketch of it, as it were. That alarmed me, but I dared not show it here. The wolves' ears pricked a little as we moved off up the garden, but they did not move, to my great relief.

Back through the house Eggs led me in his lurching, puppet's gait, around the edges of the room with the devices, where the humming filled the air and still seemed to drag at me in a way I did not care for at all, to another brightly lit, windowless room on the other side. It was a kitchen-place, furnished in what seemed to be glass. Here Eggs cannoned into a glass table and stopped short, looking at me expectantly. I gazed around at glass-fronted apparatus, some of it full of crockery, some of it clearly food stores, with food heaped behind the glass, and some of it quite mysterious to me. I made for the glass cupboard full of various joints of meat. I could see they were fresh, although the thing was clearly not a refrigerator. "How do you open this?" I asked.

Eggs looked down at his great hands, planted in encircling vapour on top of the glass table. "I don't not know, Lady."

I could have shaken him. Instead I clawed at the edges of the cupboard. Nothing happened. There it was, warmish, piled with a good fifty kilograms of meat, while three starving wolves prowled outside, and nothing I could do seemed to have any effect on the smooth edge of the glass front. At length I pried my fingernails under the top edge and pulled, thinking it moved slightly.

Eggs's huge hand knocked against mine, nudging me awkwardly away. "No, no, Lady. That way you'll get hurt. It is under stass-spell, see."

For a moment he fumbled doubtfully at the top rim of the glass door, but, when I made a movement to come back and help, his hands suddenly moved, smoothly and surely. The thing clicked. The glass slid open downward and the smell of meat rolled out into the kitchen.

So you *do* know how to do it! I thought. And I *knew* you did! There was some hint he had given me, I knew, as I reached for the nearest joint, which I could not quite see now.

"No, *no,* Lady!" This time Eggs pushed me aside hard. He was really distressed. "Never put hand into stass-spell. It will die on you. You do this." He took up a long, shiny pair of tongs which I had not noticed because they were nested into the top of the cupboard, and grasped the nearest joint with them. "This, Lady?"

"And two more," I said. "And when did you last eat, Eggs?" He shrugged and looked at me, baffled. "Then get out those two steaks, too," I said. Eggs seemed quite puzzled, but he fetched out the meat. "Now we must find water for them as well," I said.

"But there is juice here in this corner!" Eggs objected. "See." He went to one of the mysterious fixtures and shortly came back with a sort of cardboard cup swaying in one hand, which he handed me to taste, staring eagerly while I did. "Good?" he asked.

It was some form of alcohol. "Very good," I said, "but not for wolves." It took me half an hour of patient work to persuade Eggs to fetch out a large lightweight bowl and then to manipulate a queer faucet to fill it with water. He could not see the point of it at all. I was precious near to hitting him before long. I was quite glad when he stayed behind in the kitchen to shut the cabinets and finish his cup of "juice."

The wolves had advanced down the garden. I could see their pricked ears and their eyes above the veranda boards, but they did not move when I stepped out onto the veranda. I had to make myself move with a calmness and slowness I was far from feeling. Deliberately, I dropped each joint, one by one, with a sticky thump onto the strange surface. From the size and the coarse grain of the meat, it seemed to be venison—at least, I hoped it was. Then I carefully lowered the bowl to stand at the far end of the veranda, looking all the time through my hair at the wolves. They did not move, but the open jaws of the big wolf, Annie, were dripping.

The bowl down, I backed away into the living room, where I just had to sit down on the nearest blue block. My knees gave.

They did not move for long seconds. Then all three disappeared below the veranda and I thought they must have slunk away. But the two smaller ones reappeared, suddenly, silently, as if they had materialised, at the end of the veranda beside the bowl. Tails trailing, shaking all over, they crept toward it. Both stuck their muzzles in and drank avidly. I could

hear their frantic lapping. And when they raised their heads, which they both did shortly, neatly and disdainfully, I realised that one of the joints of meat had gone. The great wolf, Annie, had been and gone.

Her speed must have reassured Theo and Hugh. Both sniffed the air, then turned and trotted toward the remaining joints. Each nosed a joint. Each picked it up neatly in his jaws. Theo seemed about to jump down into the garden with his. But Hugh, to my astonishment, came straight toward the open window, evidently intending to eat on the carpet as dogs do.

He never got a chance. Theo dropped his joint and sprang at him with a snarl. There was the heavy squeak of clawed paws. Hugh sprang around, hackles rising the length of his lean, sloping back, and snarled back without dropping his portion. It was, he seemed to be saying, his own business where he went to eat. Theo, crouching, advancing on him with lowered head and white teeth showing, was clearly denying him this right. I braced myself for the fight. But at that moment, Annie reappeared, silent as ever, head and great forepaws on the edge of the veranda, and stood there, poised. Theo and Hugh vanished like smoke, running long and low to either side. Both took their food with them, to my relief. Annie dropped out of sight again. Presently there were faint, very faint, sounds of eating from below.

I went back to the glassy kitchen, where I spent the next few hours getting Eggs to eat, too. He did not seem to regard anything in the kitchen as edible. It took me a good hour to persuade him to open a vegetable cabinet and quite as long to persuade him to show me how to cook the food. If I became insistent, he said, "I don't not know, Lady," lost interest, and shuffled off to the windowless room to play with the pretty lights. That alarmed me. Every time I fetched him back, the humming chime from the glass apparatus seemed to drag at me more intensely. I tried pleading. "Eggs, I'm going to cut these yams, but I can't find a knife somehow." That worked better. Eggs would come over obliging and find me a thing like a prong and then wander off to his "juice" again. There were times when I thought we were going to have to eat everything raw.

But it got done in the end. Eggs showed me how to ignite a terrifying heat source that was totally invisible and I fried the food on it in a glass skillet. Most of the vegetables were quite strange to me, but at least the steak was recognisable. We were just sitting down on glass stools to eat it at the glass table, when a door I had not realised was there slid aside beside me. The garden was beyond. The long snout of Hugh poked through the gap. The pale eyes met mine and the wet nose quivered wistfully.

"What do you want?" I said, and I knew I had jerked with fear. It was obvious what Hugh wanted. The garden must have filled with the

smell of cooking. But I had not realised that the wolves could get into the kitchen when they pleased. Trying to seem calm, I tossed Hugh some fat I'd trimmed off the steaks. He caught it neatly and, to my intense relief, backed out of the door, which closed behind him.

I was almost too shaken to eat after that, but Eggs ate his share with obvious pleasure, though he kept glancing at me as if he was afraid I would think he was making a pig of himself. It was both touching and irritating. But the food—and the "juice"—did him good. His face became pinker and he did not jig so much. I began to risk a few cautious questions. "Eggs, did Petra live in this house or just work here?"

He looked baffled. "I don't know."

"But she used the wolves to help her in her work, didn't she?" It seemed clear to me that they *must* have been laboratory animals in some way.

Eggs shifted on his stool. "I don't not know," he said unhappily.

"And did the Master help in the work, too?" I persisted.

But this was too much for Eggs. He sprang up in agitation, and, before I could stop him, he swept everything off the table into a large receptacle near the door. "I can't say!" I heard him say above the crash of breaking crockery.

After that he would listen to nothing I said. His one idea was that we must go to the living room. "To sit elegantly, Lady," he explained. "And I will bring the sweet foods and the juice to enjoy ourselves with there."

There seemed no stopping him. He surged out of the kitchen with an armload of peculiar receptacles and a round jug of "juice" balanced between those and his chin, weaving this way and that among the devices in the windowless room. These flared and flickered and the unsupported knife danced in the air as I pursued him. I felt as much as saw the fluted glass structure changing shape again. The sound of it dragged at the very roots of me.

"Eggs," I said desperately. "How do I call the Master? Please."

"I can't say," he said, reeling on into the living room.

Some enlightenment came to me. Eggs meant exactly what he said. I had noticed that when he said "I don't *not* know," this did not mean that he did not know: It usually seemed to be something he could not explain. Now I saw that when he said "I can't say," he meant that he was, for some reason, unable to tell me about the Master. So, I thought, struggling on against the drag of the chiming apparatus, this means I must use a little cunning to get him to tell me.

In the living room Eggs was laying out dishes of sweets and little balls of cheese near the center of the large blue sofalike block. I sat down

at one end of it. Eggs promptly came and sat beside me, grinning and breathing "juice" fumes. I got up and moved to the other end of the sofa. Eggs took the hint. He stayed where he was, sighing, and poured himself another papery cup of his "juice."

"Eggs," I began. Then I noticed that the wolf, Hugh, was crouched on the veranda facing into the room, with his brindled nose on his paws and his sharp haunches outlined against the sunset roses. Beyond him were the backs of the two others, apparently asleep. Well, wolves always leave one at least of their pack on guard when they sleep. I told myself that Hugh had drawn sentry duty and went back to thinking how I could induce Eggs to tell me how to get hold of this Master. By this time I felt I would go mad unless someone explained this situation to me.

"Eggs," I began again, "when I ask you how I fetch the Master, you tell me you can't say, isn't that right?" He nodded eagerly, obligingly, and offered me a sweet. I took it. I was doing well so far. "That means that something's stopping you telling me, doesn't it?" That lost him. His eyes slid from mine. I looked where his eyes went and found that Hugh had been moving, in the unnoticed silent way a wild creature can. He was now couched right inside the room. The light feral eyes were fixed on me. Help! I thought. But I had to go on with what I was saying before Eggs's crazed mind lost it. "So I'm going to take it that when you say 'I can't say,' you mean 'Yes,' Eggs. It's going to be like a game."

Eggs's face lit up. "I like games, Lady!"

"Good," I said. "The game is called Calling-the-Master. Now I know you can't tell me direct how to call him, but the rule is that you're allowed to give me hints."

That was a mistake. "And what is the hint, Lady?" Eggs asked, in the greatest delight. "Tell me and I will give it."

"Oh—I—er—" I said. And I felt something cold gently touch my hand. I looked down to find Hugh standing by my knees. Beyond him, Theo was standing up, bristling. "What do you want now?" I said to Hugh. His eyes slid across the plates of sweets and he sighed, like a dog. "Not sweets," I said firmly. Hugh understood. He laid his long head on my knee, yearningly.

This produced a snarl from Theo out on the veranda. It sounded like pure jealousy.

"You can come in, too, if you want, Theo," I said hastily. Theo gave no sign of understanding, but when I next looked he was half across the threshold. He was crouched, not lying. His hackles were up and his eyes glared at Hugh. Hugh's eyes moved to see where he was, but he did not raise his chin from my knee.

All this so unnerved me that I tried to explain what a hint was by telling Eggs a story. I should have known better. "In this story," I said, absently stroking Hugh's head as if he were my dog. Theo instantly rose to his feet with the lips of his muzzle back and his ears up. I removed my hand—but quick! "In this story," I said. Theo lay down again, but now it was me he was glaring at. "A lady was left three boxes by her father, one box gold, one silver, and one lead. In one of the boxes there was a picture of her. Her father's orders were that the man who guessed which of the three boxes her picture was in could marry her—"

Eggs bounced up with a triumphant laugh. "I know! It was in the lead box! Lead protects. I can marry her!" He rolled about in delight. "Are you that lady?" he asked eagerly.

I suppressed a strong need to run about screaming. I was sure that if I did, either Theo or Annie would go for me. I was not sure about Hugh. He seemed to have been a house pet. "Right," I said. "It *was* in the lead box, Eggs. This *other* lady knew that, but the men who wanted to marry her had to guess. All of them guessed wrong, until one day a beautiful man came along whom this *other* lady wanted to marry. So what did she do?"

"Told him," said Eggs.

"No, she was forbidden to do that," I said. *God give me patience!* "Just like you. She had to give the man hints instead. Just like you. Before he came to choose the box, she got people to sing him a song and—remember, it was the *lead* box—every line in that song rhymed with "lead." A rhyme is a word that sounds the same," I added hurriedly, seeing bewilderment cloud in Eggs's face. "You know—'said' and 'bled' and 'red' all rhyme with 'lead.' "

"Said, bled, red," Eggs repeated, quite lost.

"Dead, head," I said. Hugh's cold nose nudged my hand again. Wolves are not usually scavengers, unless in dire need, but I thought cheese would not hurt him. I passed him a round to keep him quiet.

Theo sprang up savagely and came half across the room. At the same instant, Eggs grasped what a rhyme was. "Fed, instead, bed, wed!" he shouted, rolling about with glee. I stared into Theo's grey-green glare and at his pleated lip showing the fangs beneath it, and prayed to heaven. Very slowly and carefully, I rolled a piece of cheese off the sofa toward him. Theo swung away from it and stalked back to the window. "My hint is bedspread, Lady!" Eggs shouted.

Hugh, meanwhile, calmly took his cheese as deftly and gently as any hunting dog and sprang up onto the sofa beside me, where he stood with his head down, chewing with small bites to make the cheese last.

"Now you've done it, Hugh!" I said, looking nervously at Theo's raked-up back and at the sharp outline of Annie beyond him.

"Thread, head, watershed, bread!" bawled Eggs. I realised he was drunk. His face was flushed and his eyes glittered. He had been putting back quantities of "juice" ever since he first showed me the kitchen. "Do I get to marry you now, Lady?" he asked soulfully.

Before I could think what to reply, Hugh moved across like lightning and bit Eggs on his nearest large folded knee. He jumped clear even quicker, as Eggs surged to his feet, and streaked off to join Theo on the veranda. I heard Theo snap at him.

Eggs took an uncertain step that way, then put his hand to his face. "What is this?" he said. "This room is chasing its tail." It was clear the "juice" had caught up with him.

"I think you're drunk," I said.

"Drink," said Eggs. "I must get a drink from the faucet. I am dying. It is worse than being remade." And he went blundering and crashing off into the windowless room.

I jumped up and went after him, sure that he would do untold damage bumping into cauldron or candle. But he wove his way through the medley of displays as only a drunk man can, avoiding each one by a miracle, and reached the kitchen when I was only halfway through the room. The hum of the crystal apparatus held me back. It dragged at my very skin. I had still only reached the cauldron when there was an appalling splintering crash from the kitchen, followed by a hoarse male scream.

I do not remember how I got to the kitchen. I only remember standing in the doorway, looking at Eggs kneeling in the remains of the glass table. He was clutching at his left arm with his right hand. Blood was pulsing steadily between his long fingers and making a pool on the glass-littered floor. The face he turned to me was so white that he looked as if he were wearing greasepaint. "What will you do, Lady?" he said.

Do? I thought. I'm a vet. I can't be expected to deal with humans! "For goodness' sake, Eggs," I snapped at him. "Stop this messing about and get me the Master! Now. This instant!"

I think he said, "And I thought you'd never tell me!" But his voice was so far from human by then it was hard to be sure. His body boiled about on the floor, surging and seething and changing colour. In next to a second the thing on the floor was a huge grey wolf, with its back arched and its jaws wide in agony, pumping blood from a severed artery in its left foreleg.

At least I knew what to do with that. But before I could move, the door to the outside slid open to let in the great head and shoulders of

Annie. I backed away. The look in those light, blazing eyes said: "You are not taking my mate like *she* did."

Here the chiming got into my head and proved to be the ringing of the telephone. My bedside clock said 5:55 A.M. I was quite glad to be rid of that dream as I fumbled the telephone up in the dark. "Yes?" I said, hoping I sounded as sleepy as I felt.

The voice was a light, high one, possibly a man's. "You won't know me," it said. "My name is Harrison Ovett and I'm in charge of an experimental project involving wild animals. We have a bit of an emergency on here. One of the wolves seems to be in quite a bad way. I'm sorry to call you at such an hour, but—"

"It's my job," I said, too sleepy to be more than proud of the professional touch. "Where are you? How do I get to your project?"

I think he hesitated slightly. "It's a bit complicated to explain," he said. "Suppose I come and pick you up? I'll be outside in twenty minutes."

"Right," I said. And it was not until I put the phone down that I remembered my dream. The name was the same, I swear. I would equally swear to the voice. This is why I have spent the last twenty minutes feverishly dictating this account of my dream. If I get back safely I'll erase it. But if I don't—well, I am not sure what anyone can do if Annie's torn my throat out, but at least someone will know what became of me. Besides, they say forewarned is forearmed. I have some idea what to expect.

The Plague of Peacocks

From the moment the Platts came to Chipping Hanbury everyone knew they were Caring People. They bought the old cottage up Weavers Close beside the field where the children went to cycle and play football. Mr Platt took the cottage apart all by himself and built it up again and painted it white. Mrs Platt took the garden apart and painted everything there white too.

When they had done that, they began caring for Chipping Hanbury.

Mr Platt brought out a news sheet which he called *Hanbury Village News* and put a copy through everyone's door. The copies were addressed to everyone by their first names in the most friendly way: the Willises' was to Glenda and Jack, the Moores' to Lily and Tony, the Dougals' to Marcia and Ken, and so on. Everyone wondered how Mr Platt knew their names, and whether he was right to call Hanbury a village when it was really just a place on the edge of London. The news sheet was full of kind advice about how Hanbury needed more street lights and a bus shelter and tidier front gardens. Weavers Pond was full of rubbish too, Mr Platt said reproachfully, and the football field ought to be a proper sports centre. People like Glenda and Jack, who had private incomes, really ought to see about cleaning the place up.

"Why does he think we have private incomes?" said Mrs Willis. "Because the children have ponies?" Mrs Willis did typing for people in order to pay for the ponies, and she was rather hurt.

Meanwhile, Mrs Platt was caring for animals. The first to go was the Dougals' cat Sooty. Then the Deans' dog Lambert. Then Holly Smith's angora rabbit. Mrs Platt called on the Dougals, the Deans and the Smiths and explained at length that she had found the animal wandering about, and it might have gone in the road, and there was such a lot of traffic these days, and one should keep pets tied up. Mrs Platt was thin, with intense grey eyes, and she bent forwards nervously when she talked, and twisted her hands together. People found it hard to interrupt her when she was so worried. But after an hour or so, the Dougals and the Deans and the Smiths plucked up courage to ask what had happened to their

animals. Mrs Platt explained that she had put them in the car and Mr Platt had driven them to a vet he knew, to have them put down.

Mr Platt's next news sheet had a sorrowful page on how badly people looked after their animals. The other pages were about the new greenhouses Mr Platt was building behind the cottage. Mr Platt was a thick energetic man with a beard and juicy red lips, and he had a passion for building greenhouses. When he was not doing that, he was either standing with his head back and his chest out admiring the latest greenhouse, or he was walking round Hanbury looking for news to put in his news sheet. He was walking in Hart Lane when Sarah Willis got run away with by her pony.

What made Chunter bolt was a mystery. Sarah always said he had seen Mr Platt and was afraid of being taken to the vet too. Anyway, there was Chunter hammering along the road, striking frantic sparks from it with his hooves, with Sarah clinging on for dear life, when Mr Platt came jumping out of the hedge and swung on Chunter's bridle.

"Thanks," said Sarah, when Chunter had stopped.

"You should never, never let a pony gallop on a tarmac road," said Mr Platt. "I don't think anyone has explained to you: it ruins their feet and jars their legs."

"But I didn't—!" said Sarah. That was all she managed to say, because Mr Platt proved to be just as good a talker as his wife, and he walked back to the house with her, holding Chunter's bridle and explaining gently how you should treat a pony. "I think I must come inside and explain to Glenda that you shouldn't ride without proper supervision," he said when they got there. And he did. When he had done that, he went out to look at the barn where the ponies lived and came back to tell Mrs Willis that it was not suitable for ponies.

Mrs Willis was typing somebody's book about the history of Poland, full of names like Mrzchtochky, and she left out several Zs. "I shall go mad," she said.

"Don't worry," said Sarah. "There's always Daniel Emanuel."

No one had yet told the Platts about Daniel Emanuel. This was odd, because Daniel Emanuel was well known to be interested in animals too. Only the week before, he had fallen out of the oak tree in the football field trying to catch a squirrel. Last year he had cut himself on rusty iron wading into Weavers Pond after a duck and nearly died of tetanus, because he had heard you could eat ducks.

Mrs Platt met Daniel Emanuel first. She was coming home after caring for the Moores' budgie. She had found it on her windowsill. By this time, she had noticed that people did not quite like it when she took their pets to the vet. So she took the budgie home. "Look, Lily," she ex-

plained, "I've cut his wings for you, ever so neatly, so that he won't be able to fly away again."

"How kind!" Mrs Moore said bitterly, thinking she would have to keep the cat in the yard in case Mrs Platt cared for the cat too. "You'll have to keep the budgie in your bedroom," she said to her son Terry. "I hope Daniel Emanuel does something to the Platts soon!"

Mrs Platt had got halfway home, to the bottom of the main road, when she saw, to her horror, a four-year-old boy walk out into the traffic. A bus bucked to a stop almost on top of him. Two cars missed him by two separate miracles. Mrs Platt rushed into the road and seized the child's arm. "Who are you, little man? Does your Mummy know you're out?"

He looked up at her. "I'm Daniel Emanuel, of course," he said. He had curly hair and long eyelashes and a band of freckles across his nose.

"Where do you live?" said Mrs Platt.

Daniel Emanuel did not seem to be sure. He let Mrs Platt lead him round Chipping Hanbury. She seemed to want to, and he felt like a walk anyway. After an hour or so though, she began to bother him. She kept asking things and calling him "little man." The only little men Daniel Emanuel had ever heard of were the dwarves in Snow White, and he began to be afraid he would not grow any more. He took Mrs Platt home so that he could ask Linda.

Mrs Platt looked at the O'Flahertys' tall ramshackle house with pieces of car lying about the front garden under the washing-line. Children were running and screaming, and Mrs O'Flaherty was anxiously looking over the front gate. "This is a Problem Family," Mrs Platt said to herself, "and I must care for them."

"Daniel Emanuel!" everyone in the garden screamed.

"He was walking in the traffic," Mrs Platt explained. She had meant to have a long talk with Mrs O'Flaherty about her problems, but Mrs O'Flaherty was so glad to see Daniel Emanuel safe that she took him straight indoors. "No manners either," Mrs Platt said sorrowfully.

Indoors, Mrs O'Flaherty said, "You naughty boy!" and raised her fist. Daniel Emanuel's face screwed up miserably. "Oh, I can't hit him!" said Mrs O'Flaherty and she took her fist down. Daniel Emanuel unscrewed his face and beamed. "Linda," said Mrs O'Flaherty, "why did you let him go in the road?"

Linda was five, and the only one who knew how to manage Daniel Emanuel. She shrugged. There were times when even she could not stop Daniel Emanuel. "He can think," she explained, "and the cars just stop."

"He may think they will, but they don't," said Mrs O'Flaherty and hurried away to get lunch. A mother who had seven children and a hus-

band who spends his spare time stock-car racing has not quite time to understand everything.

"Am I a little man?" Daniel Emanuel asked Linda anxiously.

Linda knew what he meant. "Not you!" she said. "You'll grow bigger than Dad."

Daniel Emanuel was much relieved. He was not sure he liked Mrs Platt. She said things that were not true.

Mr Platt's next news sheet had a lot in it about Problem Families.

"Oh good," said Mrs Willis to Sarah and James. "They've met Daniel Emanuel."

Next time Daniel Emanuel gave Linda the slip he went to look at the Platts' cottage. He thought it was lovely. The stones round the flowers were painted white. There was a white wheelbarrow on the front lawn with flowers planted in it which bothered Daniel Emanuel. Flowers should grow in the ground. Daniel Emanuel took the flowers out carefully and tipped the earth on the grass. He found Mr Platt's golf clubs in the porch and dug a hole for the flowers with them in front of the porch. He put the flowers in the hole and carefully opened the tap in the rainwater butt to give the flowers a drink. Then he found a pot of white paint in the porch and thought he ought to give the hole a white rim like the other flowerbeds. When Mr Platt came round the house from building his fourth greenhouse, he found Daniel Emanuel squatting in a river using a bent golf club as a paintbrush.

Mr Platt took Daniel Emanuel in a stern kind hand and led him home, talking gently to him about how wicked he was. Daniel Emanuel seemed a little vague about what wicked meant. Mr Platt explained by telling him stories, and one of the stories was Daniel in the Lions' Den.

"Oh, Daniel Emanuel!" said Mrs O'Flaherty when she opened the door. Daniel Emanuel was earth-coloured with streaks of white. Mr Platt was shocked to see that Mrs O'Flaherty had been reading a book while she cooked lunch. She had two favourite books which she read turn and turn about to keep her sane: this one was *The Mill on the Floss;* the other was *The Count of Monte Cristo.* She knew both so well that she could do most things while she was reading.

Mr Platt explained what Daniel Emanuel had done and gave Mrs O'Flaherty long and patient advice on how to bring up children, until Mrs O'Flaherty smelt the potatoes burning and snatched Daniel Emanuel up and ran. "What a feckless woman," Mr Platt said sadly.

Mrs O'Flaherty was so annoyed about the potatoes that Daniel Emanuel barely got scolded. "Where's any lions?" he asked Linda as soon as he was free.

"Aren't any," said Linda. "Only in cages in the Zoo."

The next day, Daniel Emanuel set out to find himself a cage of lions.

There are no lions in Chipping Hanbury. The only large beasts are Sarah Willis's Chunter and James Willis's Ben. Daniel Emanuel was seen by James standing in the doorway of the ponies' barn. "Is this a den?" Daniel Emanuel asked.

"No," said James. "It's a stall."

Daniel Emanuel nodded and went away. He was next heard of eight miles away in Abbots Hanbury. How he got there Daniel Emanuel never said, but there he was. He was in a pen in the cattle market with a hundred pigs, angrily shouting, "Bite me!" His father was home when the police telephoned. He drove his newest car to Abbots Hanbury and fetched Daniel Emanuel away. Since Mr O'Flaherty was the only person in the world that Daniel Emanuel was afraid of, Daniel Emanuel arrived home very sore and sullen. "I don't like Platts," he told Linda.

Both the Platts were very concerned about Daniel Emanuel. Mr Platt went to see Mr O'Flaherty to tell him Daniel Emanuel needed special care, and the Dougals saw him leave again rather quickly. Mrs Platt went to speak to Mrs Willis. "Glenda," she said, "I think we two should get together and care for our Problem Family. The O'Flahertys, you know."

This time, Mrs Willis was typing someone's experimental novel. It went down the page in two columns which said the same thing, but not quite, and it had to catch the five o'clock post. "I don't think they're a problem," she said. "Ask James and Sarah. Their main friends are Patrick and Thelma O'Flaherty. Do let me catch the post." But Mrs Platt stayed persuading Mrs Willis till four o'clock. At four-thirty Mr Platt arrived with some brochures, saying that he and Mrs Platt thought Mrs Willis ought to be using a word processor. When Sarah and James and Mr Willis came home just after five, Mr Platt was still there and Mrs Willis was in tears.

"Do something!" said Mr Willis.

James and Sarah saddled their ponies and went drumming away down the bridle path to the football field where Thelma and Patrick were riding their bicycles. "What is it?" said Patrick, propping himself on the hedge.

"Make Daniel Emanuel do something to the Platts," said Sarah.

"You can borrow the ponies and we'll go on a bike-and-pony trek if you do," said James.

Thelma and Patrick looked wistfully at one another. It was an offer they couldn't refuse. It cost Patrick a lot to say, "We can't make him do anything." And it cost Thelma just as much to add, "Linda's his manager."

"Ask her, and we'll do the trek anyway," said Sarah.

During the last month, Linda had been rather pestered. Holly Smith, Terry Moore and Alastair Dougal had also made offers that couldn't be refused to Brendan, Maureen and Brian O'Flaherty. "He's not ready to do anything yet," she told Thelma and Patrick. "But I'll try."

Next Saturday, Sarah and James kept their promise and the trek set off to Beacon Hill. Linda kept hers by taking Daniel Emanuel for a walk in Weavers Close. But it was one of Daniel Emanuel's saintly days. Nothing happened, except that Mrs Platt saw them and hurried out saying, "Little children like you oughtn't to be out alone!" She brought them inside the cottage, where it was neat and plain and brown, and made them sit down. Linda looked hopefully round for biscuits at least, but Mrs Platt sat down too and told them the story of Jesus. Linda knew it. She had been sent home from school on her first day crying about Jesus. She turned paler and paler.

"Did it hurt much?" she whispered.

"What, dear?" asked Mrs Platt.

"Being nailed up in a tree," Linda whispered.

Mrs Platt was rather taken aback. "Well—" Since she did not quite know what to tell Linda, she took them back home feeling she had given them both something to think about.

She had. While Mrs O'Flaherty was trying to stop Linda crying, Daniel Emanuel collected four nails, a hammer and some string, and marched off to the oak tree in the football field to find out for himself if it hurt to be crucified.

Luckily for him, he got tangled in the string before he had banged in the first nail properly. Even more luckily, Sarah, James, Patrick and Thelma happened to be coming home only an hour later after an almost perfect day. They heard the thin little wailing, which was all the noise Daniel Emanuel was able to make by then. "That's Daniel Emanuel!" said Thelma, and managed to make Chunter gallop. And it was lucky the ponies were there. Daniel Emanuel was quite high up, hanging mostly by one arm. They managed to reach him by putting the ponies under the branch, with James, standing on the ponies, one foot on Chunter and one on Ben, boosting Patrick to the branch to cut the string. Sarah held the ponies and Thelma caught Daniel Emanuel as he came down. He hurt a lot, and he was frozen, and he was very angry. "It's not *good* for people!" he kept saying as he rode home in front of Thelma. They put him to bed, and he brooded. He was very angry with both the Platts. They pretended to be kind and told you bad things.

Mr and Mrs Platt went from house to house with a petition to have the oak tree cut down. They said it was very dangerous.

"Wouldn't it be easier to take Daniel Emanuel to the vet?" Mrs Willis asked sweetly.

Mr Platt didn't follow her meaning at all; but he followed Mr O'Flaherty's meaning when Mr O'Flaherty told him what to do with his petition.

Daniel Emanuel was still brooding. "He's nearly ready," Linda told the others. Nearly every day, Daniel Emanuel went round to Weavers Close and stood looking at the cottage thinking what to do. When Mr and Mrs Platt came out to take him home, he had vanished before they got to the road. But one day the Platts went out in their car. Daniel Emanuel wandered through the garden and round the back. He wandered thoughtfully through all the greenhouses. Mr Platt had never stopped building greenhouses. There were six by now. Daniel Emanuel ate tomatoes in one and picked a bunch of flowers in two. He made pies in flowerpots in the other three, thinking, thinking. But none of it gave him any ideas and he went away.

Mr Platt did not want to meet Mr O'Flaherty face to face again. He telephoned and pointed out that Daniel Emanuel was being allowed to run wild. It was not so much the tomatoes, he said, but the child's own good... The person the other end rang off. "Will you come here, Danny!" Mr O'Flaherty roared. Mr Platt would have been shocked at the storm which broke out then.

When it was over, Mr O'Flaherty went out in the car to cool down. Mrs O'Flaherty lay down and read *The Count of Monte Cristo* to calm her nerves. Daniel Emanuel, very sore and sullen, went to watch television.

It was a programme about birds. The hen-bird came tiptoeing onto the screen, thin and brown and nervy, jerking its little head in just the same way that Mrs Platt did when she explained something for your own good. The cock-bird strutted on and bent its neck back just like Mr Platt. Then it spread out a great circle of tail and looked exactly like Mr Platt admiring a greenhouse.

"Platt, Platt!" shrieked Daniel Emanuel and ran to find Linda.

Linda was cooking. She had tipped in a bag of flour and a bag of sugar, and she was trying to crunch in a dozen eggs with a fork before Mrs O'Flaherty stopped reading and found her. "I'm busy," she said. But her sleeve was being pulled in a particular way. She went with Daniel Emanuel and a trail of flour and mashed eggshell and looked at the television. "Peacocks," she said.

"Platts," Daniel Emanuel said. He went into the front garden among the pieces of car and thought of a peacock. When the peacock came, it was blue and green and trailed its tail like a filmstar's skirt. It stood in front of a shiny hubcap of a piece of car and looked at itself and admired

itself greatly. Daniel Emanuel nodded and thought of a peahen. She tiptoed up like Mrs Platt going after somebody's stray pet. Daniel Emanuel nodded again. "Peacocks," he murmured. "Hundreds and hundreds." And he thought of himself holding open a gap in the hedge behind Mr Platt's greenhouses to let a long, long line of peacocks and peahens tiptoe through. Hundreds, hundreds...

When Mrs O'Flaherty had finished dealing with Linda, she was very relieved to find Daniel Emanuel curled up asleep beside the hubcap of a piece of car. "Oh, isn't he an angel!" she said.

And the Platts were suddenly overwhelmed with peacocks. They sat in rows on the cottage roof, and the garden was a mass of tiptoeing green and brown, mixed with spreading tails and horrible sudden peacock screams. Peacocks got in the greenhouses. They invaded the house... But long before this, Holly Smith had rushed home shouting the news. Mrs Smith telephoned everyone in Chipping Hanbury and all the adults promptly pretended to be ill and sent their children to the football field. Mrs Willis gave up typing for other people and typed instead the news brought by a stream of children on bicycles. James and Sarah cantered from house to house delivering little cryptic notes saying things like: TWO MORE FELL THROUGH THE GREENHOUSES and SHE GOT PECKED and DROPPINGS ALL OVER SOFA and ONE LAID AN EGG IN THEIR LOO and ROOSTING ON TELEPHONE WHEN THEY TRIED TO RING VET.

A row of interested heads watched over the hedge when the Platts tried to get their car out and drive a load of peacocks to the vet. The running, the chasing, the shooing, the squawks and clouds of feathers was quite indescribable. Mrs Willis's note summed it up: THEY COULDN'T. So Mr Platt tried going round all the houses asking for help. The peacocks seemed fond of him. Twenty or so followed him faithfully from door to door and drowned his voice with screams when the doors were opened. Mr Platt was sorry to find that everyone opened the door wearing nightclothes and holding a handkerchief to their faces. There seemed to be quite a flu epidemic. So he went home, followed by his procession of birds, and the Platts waited for the peacocks to go away. But they didn't. If anything, they seemed to get more every day.

The Platts stood it for almost a month and then they went away themselves. Everyone recovered from flu in time to wave goodbye to their car as it drove off with peacocks clinging to the roof rack and more hastily waddling and flapping behind. Linda had a marvelous time that day. Mrs O'Flaherty was touched and puzzled at the way everyone seemed to be thinking of treats for Linda and Daniel Emanuel.

The Platts' cottage is still standing empty except for peacocks, but some of the peacocks seem to have lost interest and wandered away. Since

then there have been outbreaks of peacocks here and there all round the edges of London. This is because Daniel Emanuel has forgotten about them. He has started school now and has other things to think of.

The True State of Affairs

I am still not sure how I come to be locked up here, but things are coming clearer. I shall find out in the end. Meanwhile, at the risk of sending myself mad by handling reality, I have screwed out of the jailor two sheets of brownish paper, curling at the edges, ink, and a bundle of long white feathers—most of which I have frayed and crumpled trying to turn them into pens. But this one, though it scratches like the devil, seems to be working. I suspect the penknife he gave me is blunt. You do not give prisoners sharp weapons. I have tried honing it on a corner of the wall, but it bit the stone to pieces and remained itself obdurately blunt.

Lord, it's good to talk, even manually, my own dialect again! Use a word like *obdurate* here, and they stare. Their talk is only faintly dusted with Latin—and I notice, looking back over this while I sharpened my feather again, that I have caught it too. I did not come round to a really wholehearted Roman word until the last sentence.

I thought I would describe my prison and perhaps what I can gather of this castle—or *stronghold* as they call it here—but paper is so short that all I will say is that the walls are very thick, of very cold stone, and this window small and high. The light is going too. What comes in here is orange already. I shall not have time to write much more. Fancy a prisoner crying for *time*—but this is how the urge to write gets you. Since it is winter, I am wrapped in the cloak and a blanket from my bed, and still cold. I shall have to go and be brisk in the courtyard shortly. They light a fire in the mornings these days, but I can never make the fuel last all day. Anyway, I shall go and look at the tree before the light goes and then, perhaps, try a little carefully muted charm on the jailor and hope crystallised fruit might be the outcome—I crave for sugar so here. You see how adjusted I am to the life. And only a month ago I was a free woman and thought myself unhappy.

•

He did not give me anything sweet, the swine. It was one of his bad days and his corns were killing him. He told me all about his daughter's ingratitude again.

•

My name is Emily, and I am twenty-seven years old. I was brought up in Kent, where my father had his parish. Poor Father died five years ago, and Mother died last summer.

There, I feel better for having written that down. I believe who I am again. Here, they seem to think my name is Edna (a name I hate), and I am not sure that they know who Edna is any more than I do. They seem to think I am from the North. The man I call Smooth-one asked me several times if I came from the North, and I conclude that was because my accent is so different from this dialect of theirs.

I blame my troubles on their dialect—and on that bitch Hilda. If I had only understood more than a fraction of what was going on, I like to think nothing would have induced me to change into her clothes, even soaking wet as I was. But there they all were, milling about in those extraordinary garments, speaking with their strange intonation, using words I am only now beginning to grasp the meaning of, and plainly so little concerned with me or my troubles that I couldn't help returning the compliment and feeling unconcerned with theirs. I blame myself there. If I had only known how important it was going to be, I think I might have understood a great deal more. But it would have meant listening with stiff attention, like you do to a language you only half know, and they were all taking so little notice of me that their conversations, if they started in my neighbourhood, frequently ended on the other side of the room. And meanwhile another conversation would start up near me and drown the first.

Of course, I was intrigued by the atmosphere of desolation and panic. I still am. They were like refugees, all of them. There was a feeling of *sauve qui peut*. But I still don't think that explains why the peacock young man departed in such a hurry with most of the men and left the women to look after themselves. He seemed so fond of that Hilda. And he looked nice, in a self-centred Patrician way. And she—well, I should say she was one of those who can't be fond of anybody. The tall, flat-breasted, mauve-handed kind. No strong feelings, and sex scares them silly. I suppose she was pretty, but it seemed out of character the way she let him trail his little finger lustfully about the palm of her hand whenever he spoke to her. It can't have been the custom. Nobody else does it, not even Edwin, thank the Lord. No. I can't make it out. Nor do I want to. I dislike the woman too much, particularly now I see how she conned me into dressing up in her clothes and posing as her, even to the extent of clumping

about in those wooden patten-things to make me look the right height, and the scarf—to keep the cold out, I trustfully thought. I'm not usually that much of a fool, and I remember it did strike me as a little too good to be true when they suddenly became so kind and concerned—Hilda and that fat maid of hers—but I had been ignored for so long, and I was so wet and exhausted, that I was pathetically grateful to be noticed at last.

That's right, Emily. Make excuses to yourself. You were dumb. And I didn't even see the point when Red-face comes bursting in and grabs me and not Hilda. I think light dawned a little when they pulled me out of the coach—or Black Maria, or whatever it was—and into the stone bowels of this stronghold, where the tall, smooth type was waiting: they were obviously so disconcerted when they saw me clearly. My word, they are an unpleasant pair, those two. Smooth-one is worse, although it was Red-face who hit me. Up till then, I had been all taken up with this ridiculous paranoid fancy that the whole odd business had been laid on just for my benefit. It keeps recurring. That's one of my reasons for writing this. I have a dread that I am mad, and that outside this stronghold England is going on just as usual. Inside, they are humouring me. I have to keep telling myself that I was never important enough to be humoured to that extent. Then, say I, perhaps I made it all up for myself? If so, I did a pretty thorough job. And you don't make up people like Smooth-one.

When I saw Smooth-one sauntering up to Red-face, I took a nasty knock up against reality. It was just like stubbing your toe. He was factual and horrible from the wriggly red hairs in his sideburns to the dust on the toes of his boots. And I was only a tiresome sort of Thing to him. You don't make up people who are never going to be bothered to find you interesting. At least, I never have. Smooth-one, I am sure, whatever political thing is going on around here, had me shut up in these rooms primarily as one might chuck an unwanted letter in a drawer. He couldn't care less—except that I had turned out to be the wrong woman, and that irritated him. But he was angry with Red-face, not with me. He certainly could not be bothered to listen to my faint-hearted protest that I was a foreigner and scarcely knew Hilda.

That makes me very resentful. If there's one thing I mind more than having been fooled by Hilda, it's not being important to these people. It reminds me of the way you feel in hospital, when you are there with some minor complaint and all the staff are only interested in the woman in the next bed who has something really bad and complicated. You almost feel it would be worth being very ill just to be noticed. I almost feel I would rather be Hilda than a nobody they think is called Edna. And coming here was oddly like being entered into hospital. There was the same kind of waiting about on the margins of the system, while the jailor pottered

up and the soldiers discussed my case with him. I remember he said: "Lady or not?" and both the soldiers shrugged. Then he jangled keys and opened these rooms up, and I was installed officially an inmate, high up somewhere in this stronghold, for no reason that seems to me adequate.

•

Yes. Having written this, as well as considered it for a month, I see it must be so. This is a genuine citadel, not a madhouse. Edwin is a genuine jailor. I am a genuine prisoner, and it is still exceedingly cold. Of my borrowed finery, I retain Hilda's dress and the little underneath it. It is of fine, white wool, down to my feet, beautifully and curiously embroidered with spreading designs of blue, whose intricacies I now feel I know by heart. I could draw them without looking. But it has a devilishly low neck, no doubt becoming, but in no way seasonable. And, after a month, it has a grubby, wilted look. Perhaps I have too. We are both gathering dust in our drawer here. I see no end to the process.

When I got this paper, I had a fancy that I would write great things and spend my pens discovering truths. I would love to. I have a feeling that truths are gathering at the back of my head, ready to burst through. But they will not burst. The dreary trivia of prison are too much for them. I am bound to the minute perpetually, and, besides, I am not one of those who finds it easy to think in grand abstractions, and I find it even more difficult to set them down clearly. So perhaps, sadly, since I am nearly at the end of my paper, I had better simply describe these rooms which I wandered at first in such a tense and weary way. The living-room opens onto a courtyard with a shallow coping, high on the roof. I went out there as if it were freedom, but I could only see steep angles and corners of roofs and towers. There is no way out from it. It is like an island. And on its right side I looked over the coping and saw a deep, deep well of a drop between towers—a drop of a hundred feet and more down to a minute, dank courtyard surrounded by blank walls and a few blanker windows. I had a headache and it made me dizzy to look. I had to go inside. The aerial isolation of my quarters is almost inexpressible. It depressed me then (and does still) so that I went straight to the square dusty bed in the next room and lay restlessly down on it. I can almost laugh now at the way I considered that when they came to let me out they could easily wake me up. And I actually fell asleep thinking it. That was just one piece of my early folly.

•

Thank God—theirs or mine, whichever is this benevolent—Edwin now thinks I must really be a lady after all. I hope he tells someone. It was the writing that did it. He came in with supper soon after I had finished,

whereupon I defensively took up my two sheets. He, cocking his dirty old head on one side, said:

"My word, there's a fine heap of scribbles. Is all that paper full?"

I said it was, and, suspecting that he could not read, or barely so, I boldly held them out for him to see. He looked at it up and down and sideways, like a bird sighting a worm, and, with a marked increase of respectfulness, said he wished he knew his letters.

So I was right. He can't read. As long as I keep it from Wolfram, I can write what I like, thank God. Maybe I shall keep a sheet of scribbles that don't matter to me handy to show Wolfram if he asks—for Edwin is such an old gossip that he is bound to mention it. He regards it as so phenomenal that a woman can write where he cannot. And from this he has concluded I am a lady born. Not that he has said so, but it's obvious from his manner. And to mark his respect he has brought me a whole sheaf of slightly better paper and more feathers, and sharpened my penknife for me. When I need ink, I must ask. Well, well. No doubt, silly old man, he thinks he will get handsomely tipped for this in the end, by my grateful noble relatives, but I think, too, that he has a genuine respect for birth. Maybe they all have here. Look at the lengths those people went to to preserve that bitch Hilda. And to think I have spent a whole month trying to convince Edwin by other means.

It soon became my main object. Not just vulgar snobbery either. Even in my first week, when I was not bothering to think what impression I produced, so sure was I that my imprisonment must be only temporary, I was having to fend Edwin off with the utmost loftiness. He is a lewd old man, and sly and cowardly about it. He never dares come out with a direct proposal, but his hints and innuendoes are legion—even the ones I can understand, and I am sure there are many I don't.

The trouble was that I was too polite to start with. I was too shattered to be otherwise than mild, and I naturally tend to smile and be conciliatory if I can. And besides, I had a feeling that my relationship with this jailor was to be so short as to be unimportant. So things got off on the wrong foot. But he did not start really bobbing and leering until the second day, when the weather first turned cold and he had his teen-age aide, Hobby, who seems half daft, haul up a bundle of logs for a fire. As my hair was still soaking, I took it down and tried to dry it by the fire. Unfortunately, I was not yet familiar with the routine. He came in on his round half an hour after. Of course, I jumped up nervously. I was jumping up all the time that week, expecting God knows what, but hoping it was release. I wore out with it and went thin. Hilda's dress now hangs rather loose. And you should have seen the man's face. Lechery incarnate.

"Oh-ho!" says he. "There's a long lock to lengthen a man's limb!" He has a maddening habit of alliteration.

"My hair was wet," I said uppishly. "I need to dry it before I catch my death."

Death, of course, is a reference to orgasm in their parlance—I should have guessed, since it was once in ours too—and for a while things got really awkward. In the end I barricaded myself into the bedroom and waited for him to leave. He did leave in the end, for he has his pretence of being overburdened with work to keep up, but not for a long time. And until now he was not really convinced he was mistaken in me. I have concluded that letting one's hair down here means just what it implies with us. Perhaps that was why Hilda's crew accorded me so little consideration.

One's relationship with one's jailor is an odd thing. One is at once a nuisance to him and of abiding interest. This one, at least, hangs about and questions my every action. And I am totally, if rebelliously, dependent on him for everything, including tastes of the outside world. We resent one another enormously. I have built a character for myself, for his benefit, of lofty eccentricity. I pretend I don't care about anything. That maddens him. For his one desire, apart from lechery, is gossip. Nothing makes him talk more freely than my indifference. All I have learnt, I learnt this way. And then, if I feed into my indifference a few smiles, a little subterranean coaxing compliment, I can usually get material objects out of him too. That was how I got my first supply of paper. The truth is, of course, that he has nothing to do but wait on me. He has built a character too for me, of the poor overworked turnkey, and talks of his rounds and his prisoners and his poor feet endlessly. But I am now fairly convinced that I am his sole charge—though I dare not let him know it: our precarious amity would be over. Since the only other prisoner I know of is certainly in other, more competent, hands, I am sure I am his only one. And he loves and hates me accordingly.

•

I shall have to thank the gods again that I stopped there and constructed a page of dire scribbles, snatches of verse, a speech from *Hamlet,* details of prison routine, and other random things. Wolfram slunk in, saying he heard I was writing, and held out his long cold hand for a sample. So I gave him the prepared sheet, thanking my stars, and he looked it over, a little laboriously. Wolfram is certainly literate, but I think my English and my rather personal calligraphy bothered him rather. It was clear he could not make much of most of it.

"I see you're a maker," he said, pointing to one of the snatches of verse.

It did happen to be part of a poem I had written a while back; so I said yes, I was—*maker* to them is *poet*—a trifle piqued that he had not credited me with "To be or not to be," but no doubt that was above his head. I used to think Wolfram had intelligence, but now I think he is simply devious.

He said, with a rather obvious deviousness: "Freda the Maker was the daughter of a thrall, Edna." How I hate the name Edna.

I repressed an urge to point to a place where I had written "My name is Emily and I do not want to die" and answered: "Maybe. But I'm not."

Perhaps I should have said my father was a priest. Edwin implies that priests have high status here, particularly Woden's. But then not all of them are noble, I think, and I am determined to cling to the highest rank they will concede me. Hilda can do that for me at least. (They have still not caught her, by the way, so Edwin says. Red-face must be mad.)

•

My name is Emily Emily Emily. Let no one forget.

•

Wolfram went on, in a bored sort of way, to the usual interrogation. To which I said the usual things, and he slunk away again. I have not quite worked out who or what Wolfram is. He is plainly Edwin's superior, even though he is more like Uriah Heep than any living man I know, and I suspect that he must be some kind of steward or seneschal here and hoping to rise in the world. He has time. He seems younger than I am. But he tells me first one thing then another, so it's anyone's guess. He's illegitimate, I suspect, and sore about it. Though, to judge from Edwin's remarks, it's no disgrace if only you happen to be the right man's bastard. Wolfram perhaps had the wrong father. But he is educated after a fashion, and dresses in a scruffy version of the peacock-man's style.

When he first appeared, he frightened me a lot. He did the pompous legal bit, said he had come to ask me some questions for my own good. Luckily, by then I had come to myself a little—enough at least to realise that when people say it's for your own good in prison they tend to mean the opposite. Anyway, Wolfram sits himself down at this table with pen and paper and makes me sit facing him. I thought it best to seem docile, so I gave him answers. That is, I said No to everything except the question: *Are you a lady born?* to which I said Yes, firmly and at once. This is what makes me suspect Wolfram to be a bastard: he does not believe me. He probably knows all there is to know about social-climbing.

As to my other answers, I have no idea whether he believes me or not, and I am not sure he cares—except that Smooth-one may have offered him some kind of reward for finding out about me. It is clear I puzzle

them. But I now have a feeling that, provided I remain a mystery and claim high rank, they may not dare to harm me. From what Edwin says, their position is not so secure that they can risk offending any more nobility. The actual questions still mean little to me and meant next to nothing at first.

Did I go between Holland and Hathriver? Did I carry messages to the Lowlands? Do I know where Hugh is? Or Hilda? Did Hugh give me Hilda's clothes? Was I in Mark to find Asgrim? Has anyone sent me a message since I was here? (How, I ask you?) Has Asgrim ever sent me a message? With a message? Am I a thrall? Am I a lady? In either case, was my father for Hathriver or the Lowlands? Did I go between the North and Hathriver? Was the message I carried from Asgrim? Or to Asgrim? Was I for Asgrim or Hugh?

Was I the Queen of the Fairies? as I said to Wolfram on his third or fourth visit. He went a dull, pimply red and stopped asking me for a week, but he did remark that I should be kept prisoner until my answers were more satisfactory. This, in a way, set my mind at rest. I no longer jump up expecting to be let out every hour. I am simply, quietly and drearily, miserable.

•

I have thought about escaping. There is no hope of doing it by climbing. I could not drop forty feet to the nearest roof below the courtyard. I *could* let myself down by bedclothes from the yard, if they could be made long enough, but that nearest roof is in front of one of the few inhabited rooms in the place. There is a crowd of soldiers or something down there, who lean out on fine nights and call rude remarks up at me if I am out. I don't fancy getting into their clutches. Or I could clobber Edwin, which I would love to do if I had a weapon. All I have, though, is blocks of wood for the fire, which they saw too small to be much good—no doubt having thought of that. And I suspect that Edwin would take a deal of clobbering, and my arms are not strong. Oh God! I do curse myself for being so ineffectual, but I cannot see myself physically escaping; and I know that the longer I stay here the more timorous I get. My only hope is to discover enough of the names and policies of this country to be able to give Wolfram a convincing and blameless account of how I came to be in Hilda's shoes (or rather, pattens: I have burnt the things long ago and continue to shiver). This was another of my motives for writing. I thought I could set down what I know and maybe, in the setting down, hit upon my story.

To continue then. In the first week I learnt little, since I had not established a *modus vivendi* with Edwin then and was not thinking it necessary. In the second week I had Wolfram's various questions for a guide,

but they meant next to nothing to me. I set about leading Edwin on to talk—but what with his perfidious daughter, his corns and his imaginary duties, he filled hours of loitering, stinking and grinning and rattling his keys, without letting much out to the purpose. But things are gradually emerging, sideways, in parenthesis and by implication. The York and Lancaster of this country are Mark and Hathriver, and Mark seems to be in the ascendent, viewed from here. I have learnt that Red-face and Smooth-one constitute Mark, and that Mark is, in fact, the place I am now in. The stronghold is in the town, and they are both called Mark, I think. But just as I had decided that of course my father was a nobleman who supported Mark, I began to gather that the situation was not that simple. Hathriver and Mark have another rival called Holland—or the Lowlands—and I *think* that may be Hilda's party. And I shall not join her, or let my father join. Then there is the North, which is another thing again, and as I am thought to be of that party, perhaps I had better stay that way. The only trouble is that Edwin knows next to nothing about us. He regards us as barbarians, but does not quite like to say so. And since he supposes me to know more than he does, he tends to defer to me. He says things like: "But you know all about that, better than poor me." Edwin is always "poor me," the old hypocrite. But I think from the sound of it that the North is sitting on the fence and claiming neutrality—in which case they have no business to be locking me up like this. Now I think of it, I see I had better throw in a little indignation over that into my next round of answers to Wolfram's questions.

But this is mere playing about. I am a supporter of Hathriver and shall ever be—and please I pray all the gods in the pantheon, do not let Wolfram see this. Keep it from his slimy fingers. Keep it from his restless eyes. And let me not blush again in front of Edwin, not for all the reverence of all the nations. I'm not even sure that I really want to escape.

•

What a fool I am to write a thing like that just as the light goes and I have to stop. There it sat, clean in the middle of a page at the end of a block of writing, staring at anyone who cared to look. In future, since I know I must write such things, I swear to embed them deep in a page of writing, and not put them down till I can. My heart is still in my mouth at how Wolfram came in after supper and asked for my paper, saying calmly he must check that there were still the same number of pages. When I asked him indignantly why, he said that there had been messages going out and I need not think I was going to get away with it. And he took the bundle, written and unwritten, up in his long cold fingers and carried it under the lamp to count. I sat and tried to look negligent. I have never felt so horrified in my life. My hands went all wet and stiff, and my chest

hammers even now when I write of it. I could almost have hoped a sheet was missing—more than almost: I prayed it would be and I would get the blame. My man has been up to something, and God help him if they catch him at it. I wish I knew what it was. I might invent something. Oh *why* is it so hard to get news? They won't show *him* any kindness. What with this, and fearing every minute that Wolfram would uncover my last page and read the last paragraph, with his own name and that other to catch his eye, I could scarcely breathe. If he had asked me to stand, my knees would have given way. And look at me. Here I go in my folly writing all about it. Fill the page, idiot. Hurry on.

Perhaps I need not have worried about him reading it. My writing is quirky. And that lamp is so dim that I can hardly see block capitals by it. I think the other is far worse. Who could I send messages to? But he must have hundreds. Dear God, not a sign. I've been out twice to the courtyard, and nothing, and no one. What are they doing over there?

•

I feel sick. It's the usual time, and still nothing. And the horrible hurting things that Edwin says he has seen men do to men here. Oh terrible. Terrible. I shall go and have one more look, and if there is still nothing, I shall write down all about it, though I did not intend to. I meant only to refer to it, to keep myself in secret. But I have to do something positive, and this is all I can think of. Then if Wolfram reads it perhaps they'll kill me too.

•

No. Nothing. Very well.

Almost at the end of my second week, I discovered the tree. If I stood in the yard, against the wall of my living-room, between the door and the coping that looks over that horrible well of a drop, I could see through a gap between two large blocks of masonry. And there was that little graceful tree, busily shedding yellow leaves across another courtyard like mine but deeper, with higher walls. The tree was not in the courtyard. I could not make out where it grew from. But I thought rather wistfully that anybody in that courtyard would be able to see that tree all the time. There was nobody in the courtyard. There had not been since I arrived, but there was a dim light most evenings in the block of building that abutted on it. I was busy establishing my aloof and indifferent character with Edwin at the time, so I did not ask about the light. But I was so enchanted to see that tree, that I broke out of character and asked him how in the world it grew there.

It was one of his brutal evenings. He farted a lot and spat rather. "Curiosity killed the cat," he said.

"You mean you don't know," I said, and I remember I was huddling a blanket round me. Hilda's dress is made for summer, and the evenings were chilly then and have grown no warmer since.

"I know everything about this stronghold," Edwin retorted. "But if I don't please to tell you, I don't please. That there tree"—I nearly laughed—"took root from a bird-dropping in my father's time, on the roof of the head turnkey's house. My father was head turnkey then. And there's nobody knows what it feeds on. Apple-tree, it is. Good pippins." There he belched.

"Is the roof stone, or tile, or thatched?" I asked.

"Maybe a bit of thatch," he conceded. "But that's no food for apples, is it?"

"I don't know," I said distinctly, and he went onto how much better things were in his father's day. Peace and plenty, if you were to believe him, unlike the troubled times now. Nobody thought of being king then. No need for a king. The country was an alliance of free men, all equal, and thralls knew their place. This alliance of free men, I gather, was in fact an oligarchy of twelve major patricians and twenty-three minor ones. Below them is a sketchy middle class, a large yeomanry (to which Edwin claims to belong), and what sounds like a very large number of serfs or thralls, who actually belong to the great estates (like the Russian muzhicks) and have few or no rights. If ever a country was ripe for revolution, I would have thought this one was. But its culture seems largely pre-industrial, so, instead of revolution, there is this struggle for supremacy amongst the great—which I have got caught up in—a struggle which, according to Edwin's ideas, Mark is winning. Though this may be a partial view.

I wanted to go out that night and see the tree again, but Edwin locks the outer door on his after-supper round and I had to wait till morning. Then I went and looked at it repeatedly. And while I was watching it part with leaf after golden leaf, a man came out into the courtyard beneath it. It was the first time I had seen anyone there, so I watched him with interest, and wrapped my arms across my chest to keep out some of the sneaking breeze. He was better clad than I, in a dark grey stuff that looked thick. I watched him walk slowly across the courtyard—until I could see him nearly full length—and turn his face up at the sky and the tree, with a curious look of release. Poor man. I knew so well what that tree felt like to see. And presently a gust in the breeze loosed a flutter of round yellow leaves, and blew them over him. I could hear the rattle of them from here. He put out his hand and caught one. He did it in such a deft, matter-of-fact way that you would never have guessed how difficult it is to catch a gusting leaf, nor, perhaps, what a precious thing it was to

catch. He had it in his hand for quite a while, looking at it, without apparent intensity. Then he put it in his pocket. I didn't grudge him his leaf, but I envied him his chance to catch it. After that, he moved about the court for some minutes, neither slowly, nor in the brisk way you do when you're consciously taking exercise. Just savouring it, I think. I remember seeing his head and shoulders move along by the wall, until he disappeared behind the building, and then seeing him reappear full length on the further side of the court, look up at the tree, and move out of sight again. Two other watchful people were in view some of the time, guards plainly, and they never let him get more than about twenty feet away from either of them. What impressed me with this man was the way he kept his dignity and his privacy in spite of them. You felt a personality, uninvaded and strong, even from my distance. Then they seemed to tell him to come in: that was enough, now. It seemed to me that he stood very still for a moment, as if he were coping with a strong impulse to protest—nor do I blame him—before he went quietly towards where the door must be, hidden from where I was. But, on the way, he looked up and saw me. Our eyes met, and we knew what we were both feeling like. He did not stare, nor look hurriedly away either. He just moved his head calmly round, so I am sure the guards never noticed him see me. I was the one who stared, and I went on staring for half an hour at the yard and at the windows, in hopes of seeing him again.

•

I must remember to ease out of Edwin whether they believe here too that you get one happy day if you catch a falling leaf.

•

He was there again the next day, for slightly longer. He has been there every day since, at the same time, for half an hour or so, until yesterday. And I am there too, walking up and down the narrow part of this court where I can see a narrow slice of his. That second day, he was on the lookout for me, I know he was, but he was very cunning about it. He strolled around, aimlessly it seemed, into the right quarter of his yard, and there he walked in a sort of half-moon course, so that he was facing my way more than any other. I never caught him actually staring, until they told him to come in. Then he looked at me, just as he did the first time, and looked hard, as if he had been waiting to say something with that look. But looks are not that expressive, from that distance, with guards standing by, and I ran in here in a state of doubt and hectic gladness. I went straight to the bedroom and saw myself as whole as possible in the blotchy mirror there. I was flushed, but too thin, and my face is long and on the hollow side these days. Nevertheless, I have good bones and may have looked all right from a distance. But my hair and eyebrows, being

fair, may not show up. Could he see my eyes, which are my best part? I could get an idea of his. Indeed, when I saw him a second time, I thought I had seldom seen a more comely man. He is tall and his hair is dark. His shoulders are broad, and the rest of him shapely. I like the way he walks—with a sort of characteristic swing of the shoulders I would know among thousands. It is strange how people's personalities show, even from this distance. This, I know, is a good man and a strong man. Whatever they have him here for, it must be because of his connection with Hathriver and not for anything wrong that he did.

After this, I could not wait to wring something out of Edwin about him. That afternoon I said, not as if I cared: "I didn't know there was a prisoner over the way there. Is he one of yours?" I was fairly sure, even then, that Edwin had only me, but I had to humour him or get nothing.

"Ooh," he says. "That one. Have they let him out? I heard he was being kept indoors until Yule or after. No," he said. "Not one of mine. I don't go over that way, you know. Too much for my poor feet, what with all I have to do here. And I wouldn't do it, what's more, if they asked me. You know it takes six of them to watch him. He's dangerous."

He didn't look dangerous to me, and I pitied him heartily if he had six men constantly about him. How could he call his soul his own? Yet he plainly does, to his credit. I asked why he should be so dangerous.

Edwin rolled up his eyes and, showing me both yellow eyeballs, gave out a rapid set of hints which passed quite above my head. But some of it certainly referred to people killed by my man. "Mind you," said Edwin, putting his leery eyes back in their natural place, "it's political, really, why they have him here. Political. His side can't get along so well without him, you see, and they were lucky enough to grab him when they did. Lucky losers make winners worse, if you know what I mean." I did not. I said he didn't know what he was talking about, but that offended him. I had still not learnt to judge my tone with Edwin then. "I know," he retorted, "and much more could I mathel if I were asked." And, not intending to be asked, he went away.

I wish I had a better ear for speech. I see I am not rendering Edwin's peculiar dialect as it really is at all. I keep replacing his words and phrases by what I understand them to mean in my English. He would never use a word like *political*. The words are *menward* and *landminding*. But when I think of what he says, I think of it in translation, as it were.

I had to get to work on Edwin more tactfully thereafter. But before I had much time to do so, the weather turned bitterly cold. That had me in trouble, because I had been forced to wash through some of my underclothes and try to dry them by the fire. They were still not dry that frosty morning. I had to ask Edwin if he could by any means procure me some

more clothes. He refused. It was not his job, he said, but if I had any money he could send out for some for me. He knew I had no money, the old swine. I have not even got the brooch that Red-face snatched off me, or I would have bartered that. Crystallised fruit was one thing, clothing quite another. And I had to go out to see my man, even if I froze. So I took the blanket off the bed again, wrapped myself in that and went.

We both of us had to keep moving that day. It was so frosty, and the wind howled and hummed across the roofs, bringing little stutters of dry snow with it. My man had a thick green cloak that fell in great folds from his shoulders when the wind left it alone, but I could tell he was as cold as I was by the way he gripped it round him and stamped his feet. Your circulation slows badly if you live in confinement. I could see he was pale with it. The guards hated the cold and, for once, kept huddled under the wall with their backs to the weather, so that he could look at me most of the time. We circled, watching one another, as if we were at a minuet, or some other dance, distant and courtly, far off and frustrating. Its absurdity bothered us both. He stopped still, with a kind of military stamp, in the middle of his space, and stood laughing over at me about it. The wind, I remember, was whipping his hair forward and across his face. And I laughed back, not only because it was funny, but because I was delighted to find he had a sense of humour. And, still laughing, he shivered, gestured "This is no good" and took to walking again.

Then I tried sitting on the coping of my court to stop my part of the minuet, but it was far too cold there. The wind took my blanket, and I very nearly lost it down the drop; and it took my hair too and blew it out of its pins. Between hair and blanket and the sudden freezing suffusion of wind on my body, I hardly knew what to do for a moment. When I looked at him again, with the blanket safe at least, he was turning his mouth down, shaking his head and smiling, as much as to say: "Don't sit there any more, or you'll lose what little you have." And I nodded and smiled and got up again. While I did so, they told him to come in—it was a shorter time than usual, but they had had enough—and they damn near caught him smiling at me. He thought they had, and, as he went, he shot me a look so alarmed that it really upset me.

"Why *shouldn't* he look at me, if he wants to?" I said, right aloud, as I came in. I talk to myself a great deal. You do, if you have only yourself to talk to. They were not letting him do anything, as far as I could see. He was checked at every turn. But above all, I suppose, they were determined that he should not communicate with a soul—though what they think they have to fear from me still defeats me.

But it is quite clear that communication is at the root of it. And he is out to do it if he can. He must have succeeded in some degree, or

Wolfram would not have counted my paper so busily. And I know by now that they have taken some kind of vengeance on him. I have been out almost between every sentence, but there is no sign of him today either. Dear gods, mine and his, let it be no worse than close confinement again. I would gladly give up seeing him if it could be no worse. Confinement is bad enough. The weather is mild at the moment and the sun almost warm, and though the tree has no leaves left, it is still beautiful.

•

I know he is very cunning, but the odds are so great. No. Enough of that. I shall tell about the day after that, which was frostier than the first. Edwin and Hobby come tramping in, Edwin to lock and unlock and to give me my can of milk and my bread, Hobby (who must have given his name to the hob-nail, I think) to pound about striking sparks from the floor, clearing up, lighting the fire and hauling me in an iron jug of water. He tramples in and out, while Edwin stands officiously at the door. On his third entrance, Hobby brought in an armful of something red.

"This came for you," says Edwin, who never lets Hobby speak for himself if he can avoid it.

Now that was really interesting. Something *came*. Perhaps Hilda had remembered my existence. I stood up eagerly.

Edwin chuckled. "Brought you to your feet, didn't it?" he said nastily.

All I could do was to look haughty and ask what it was. Hobby put the bundle in my arms and, unwrapping it, I found it was this beautiful red cloak. It has a loose hood, three brass clasps in the shape of lions' heads down the front and, inside, it is lined with soft brown fur—I don't know from what animal. It is full long for me. On a man it would be calf-length, but it is so warm that I never bother that it trails. "Whoever sent this?" I said, too pleased to be haughty.

It was immediately apparent that Edwin had no idea and was not going to tell me. He rubbed his nose theatrically, and looked both wise and stupid. "Ah-ha! Wouldn't you like to know? One who knows your needs. You tell me."

I was shaking the thing out and stroking it, and at that second unluckily turned the hood the wrong way out. A yellow leaf from the apple tree fluttered and fell on the floor. I don't think Edwin saw its significance for a moment, but he continued to chuckle and press me to name the man who sent it. And the sight of that leaf struck me with such gratitude and such terror, and such secret joy and determination to conceal it, that I blushed. I know I have never blushed so in my life before. I could feel my eyes and my neck hot with it.

Edwin pointed at me and cackled his head off. "Ah-ha! Who's the fancyman?"

I told him that I had not the faintest idea, but of course he did not believe me and of course he told Wolfram. Wolfram adds "Who sent you the cloak?" to his list of questions when he remembers. I say stoutly that I don't know. I have searched the thing from hem to hem in hopes of a message, but there is nothing except the leaf. I see now that he dared not risk more. He must have taken risks enough as it was, and I still don't see how he did it. I hope it was not *his* leaf, but I fear it must have been. It is a little dry and crumpled, as if it has been in a pocket. I know he can get more. They pile up in the courtyard there in drifts, but this one he caught. It seems more generous to send the leaf even than the cloak.

•

Well, I have put on the cloak and gone for a last stroll in the evening, which looks very orange and heavy. The soldiers below laughed and jeered as usual and called up to me to come down and keep them warm in bed, and more besides, and I took no notice. There is still no sign of my man. The lamp is not lit in the window, either. Have they taken him away? Or have they moved him to a dungeon, or worse? Oh this is terrible. I am hard put to it not to cry, though Edwin will be in in a minute. Perhaps in a year or so I shall learn fortitude.

•

Thank God, he was there this morning. I wish I could say none the worse. But he was very pale, and moving in a slow, cautious way—I could see it was all he could do not to limp. What have those fiends done to him? I want to do it to them, many times over, and invent more besides. Your imagination is a horrible thing. It feeds on vagueness. If only I knew what they did, it would seem less terrible. At least, I hope it would. I feel pain all over when I think of the way he laboured carefully about that yard. And he did not dare look at me, it was plain. It was very obvious he was deliberately *not* looking my way. And that gave me my hint. I strolled about, trying to look careless, and half the time I could hardly see him for the most painful tears. The sky, sympathetic for once, kept sending gentle big drops of rain that were almost warm, from somewhere south. Lord, how I hope they are not going to break his spirit and violate his personality. That I could not bear to see. I keep thinking, when I see him, "Else a great Prince in prison lies," though I do not know what else *from*. Nor do I know if he is a great prince, though it is clear he is, or was, someone important. Until this morning, he certainly bore himself like someone important. If he must send messages, let him not be *caught*.

I have been at Edwin to know a little more. All I know so far can be contained in the one word *Hathriver*. My man was a major figure in that party, so much I know. And I have not learnt much more, and I have been sickened by Edwin's cackles and belching talk of "punishment." I

said carelessly that I supposed the message must have been traced now, since Wolfram only found it necessary to count my paper once.

"The message is known of," said Edwin, "but not traced. There's paper missing, and they've been at him to find where it's gone. You might as well try opening an oyster with your bare hands. He won't say. So they dealt out a little punishment instead, as you might call it. But they daren't mark him too bad, more's the pity. It might be they have to send him back whole and sound, one of these days, you see. Or if Regan and Wrinkle get taken in Widburn this week, the other side gets its own back the same way, doesn't it?"

"Oh goodness," says I, wearily, keeping an eye on the bobbing float, "do you mean to say they're still fighting? How dreary."

"Up and down," says Edwin. "Up and down. Lowlands is on the walk again, and a deal of them got killed down there a week ago. And Hathriver is massing, but no one knows for sure if it's in Widburn or Gardale. You in the North still bide your time, don't you? But there's messages there, like the ones you carried."

Rather rashly, I opened my mouth to deny that, and then, because he had seen me draw breath, I had to say: "I daresay the time isn't ripe," I catch Edwin's habit of wise saws and empty proverbs.

"No, nor will it be," says he, pointing his biggest key in the direction of my man, "while he sits there. He was to be king, that one. But now we're a body without a head until Wrankle gets crowned."

I think the name *Wrinkle*, or whatever, is Smooth-one's. I can't work out how to spell it from Edwin's pronunciation. Sometimes it seems even to have an aspirate and be *Hrinkle*, and, for a long time, I thought it was *Uncle* and saw Smooth-one as a kind of Big Brother—a role to which he is not unfitted. Red-face is either *Regin* or *Regan*. The pronunciation is exactly between the two. And, while I am at it, I will make a prophecy that Uncle will rid himself of Regan when he gets to be king, or whatever power he can scramble into.

But Edwin, leaving and waving his ridiculous keys about, sent a parting shot at my man which I find more interesting than anything else. "This will teach him," he says, "to try freeing the thralls. This is a judgement on him for meddling with the order of things. And now, having tasted it, they're shouting night and day to have nature stood on its head and themselves free men like their betters."

So there *is* likely to be revolution. And my man appears to have started it by trying to free the thralls. I wish I knew more. It seems an enlightened step. But I hope he hasn't bitten off more than he can chew. Born slaves can be very crude. One remembers the bloodier passages of the Peasants' Revolt, not to speak of Russia and Spartacus. He and his

fellow patricians could well share the fate of the aristocrats in the French Revolution. And this, I see, assumes that he will be released from here, as Edwin hinted. Oh I shall be lonely if they release him. Yet I hope they do. It's not right that a great Prince in prison lies—great Prince indeed if he was going to be king. But I won't have it that he is a bloodthirsty seizer of power, or cold politician, as Uncle evidently is. He is not. You can see it in his bearing. If he was to be king, either he has a claim, or he is convinced the country needs a supreme head. By the sound of it, they're so busy fighting among themselves that they'd be wide open to a foreign attack.

•

Why do I write my pages so full? I'm going to have to be very cunning now in order to find a scrap of paper that won't be missed. I shall not have much time for this writing. I have been hard at work all day filling my remaining sheets for Wolfram's benefit—a thing I should have done before, if I had not been more lucky than prudent. I have produced a mass of doodles and weird speculations, and followed this up by describing a bicycle. You cannot imagine how hard it is to describe a bicycle. If he reads it, Wolfram might well think I am mad. But if my man can do this for me, I feel I should take some risks too. And when I think what he did, it seems too great a length to go to. I hope the result is as precious to him as it is to me.

The message had not gone at all, you see. It came to me today. Hobby brought it, of all people. While he was lighting the fire this morning and Edwin had gone hobbling through to unlock the outside door, Hobby calmly fetches this piece of paper out of his great boot and hands it to me. Then he goes on stacking up the kindling, just as if nothing had happened. I know I stared at him. I couldn't behave with Hobby's nonchalance, not if my life depended on it, though I am going to have to try. It was only a tiny, folded scrap of paper—they must have gone over his things with a tooth-comb to find it missing—and I pushed it down the front of Hilda's dress, most clumsily, what with haste, cold and excitement. I know I went pale—anyway, my impressions of things were all thin, grey and ringing. It seemed as if the only real things in the place were the softish and grubby corners of that paper against my left breast, and this mauve-faced, sniffing youth imperturbably scratching flint and dropping sparks on his tinder, showing me the while the great studded soles of his boots. I had to hold onto the table to keep steady.

"You're pale today," says Edwin, stomping back in. "What's the matter with you?"

"I don't feel terribly well," I answered truthfully enough. To my annoyance and extreme terror, the wretched man came up close and ex-

amined me, blowing his cabbage-flavoured breath over me in waves. And the most grotesque and upsetting thing was that he seemed genuinely concerned. He put out his filthy old hand and pulled down the skin below each of my eyes with his thumb.

"I've seen many go this way in prison," says he. "You need good red meat and parsley, or the sickness will get you. I'll speak to Wolfram."

It was all I could do not to cackle with insane laughter. Red meat! Parsley! Try as I would, the laughter came out as a slight whimper and, I think purely because of his concern, tears came into my eyes.

He patted my shoulder. "There, there," he said, and I know it was with real kindness. "I'll see to it. Prison's no place for a lady, when all's said and done." Then he shuffled out, pushing Hobby in front of him.

I knew I would have a clear hour then. I determined to wash, do my hair and eat breakfast before I luxuriated in that note. So I said to myself. And before their footsteps were beyond my hearing, I was crouching in front of the fire tremulously unfolding the paper. The note was very short and evidently written in a hurry. He can hardly have seconds together to call his own. And I shall commit the folly of transcribing it (though I burnt the original), simply because I know I shall do it sometime, so why not now? It said: "What is your name? This now I can only think of you as My Lady. If you can answer, smile at me when you come out into your yard this morning." He did not sign it. Perhaps he did not dare. Perhaps he thinks I know who he is. I shall ask him his name when I tell him mine. Oh, has anyone ever been so glad to receive a soiled scrap of paper as I am to have this? I wish I had dared keep it. The writing, though hurried, is strong and slanting, evidently educated, habitual writing—the script of one who knows his own mind and has an eye for appearances: it is, despite its haste, handsomely done, in straight lines well disposed on the paper. Calligraphy is different here, though. They do not join their letters to speak of—only the "t" by its cross-stroke to the next letter.

Glad as I am, he should not have risked it. It is so evident they hurt him. He was still trying not to limp this morning, though not so markedly, and he is paler than I have seen him. But I came to the parapet at once and smiled, and I could see he was overjoyed. He did not do more than glance up at me, under his eyebrows; but then he turned away and looked up at the sky and the tree and practically laughed. I could have laughed too. To have given someone so much pleasure. I could see he thinks himself amply rewarded for his pain and his cunning—what a terrible thing it is that so much trouble should produce so little, and that little seem so poignantly valuable. Seeing him this morning was the most intensely splendid thing. I have worked out what he must have done. He

hid the paper first, waited for the inevitable discovery and its outcome, and, as soon as that was over and suspicion in another direction (watching ways out of the stronghold), he sent me the message. It amazes me how much he must want to know my name, and the determination with which he set about finding out without injuring me.

•

I am going to try to be as cunning. I have finished six sheets of wild scraps of writing for Wolfram's benefit and got to the end of my present supply of paper. And the ink too. I have to tip the well on its side to get any. Now I must pray that the next supply of paper is slightly different, and get my penknife sharpened too.

•

I thought I would not get this paper and he would not get his answer after all. I nearly went mad. But I'm glad I hit Wolfram. I wish I'd hit Edwin too.

Wolfram came in while I was out in the courtyard looking over at my man's dark window, waiting to see them light the lamp there and wondering what he was thinking. When I came in again, my lamp was lit, and there was Wolfram, to my horror, reading my prepared pages and scanning these private ones too. I just had to hope that my calligraphy is too foreign for him—I still don't know how much he managed to read, and I am simply praying that he did not light on anything important. The idiocy of writing all this is unspeakable. It's lunacy. I don't know why I go on. Perhaps I am a little mad, like Wolfram thinks.

Wolfram put down my pages rather hurriedly and looked at me very carefully when I came in—and no doubt I did look a little wild, with sheer horror. He said: "They tell me you aren't feeling well."

"No," I said. "I'm not."

"What do you feel?" he said.

"Terrible," I said, and raked round my body for symptoms. "Cold, weak, trembling, you know." All of which was true, what with my terror and the fire being out. I rubbed one of my chilblains and hoped those symptoms would be adequate.

"Does your head pain you at all?" he said.

I said: "No. I feel lightheaded," as I did, after the agitations of that day. At which he looked very dubious. Edwin came in just then, and they both stood studying me most dubiously. They both looked so solemn that I could have shrieked with hysterical laughter, but it was so alarming too that I felt I could not bear any more. I made for a chair and sat down on it with something of a flop, wondering whatever they would do with me.

Edwin said: "Well?"

Wolfram said: "Not too good, is it? Hear this." And he took up one of my papers and began to read it out. I was so horrified that I had to lean my face on the back of the chair. I scarcely understood what he was reading, until I heard him say haltingly: " 'I would like a penny-farthing, even though I could never get into its saddle. They are a good six feet high, and you sometimes go right over the top.' " Then I realised that it was part of my essay on bicycles—those sheets are a set of such observations, sometimes vaguely Pascal, sometimes plain childish. "And hear this," said Wolfram. " 'Privacy is to be had in the mind and nowhere else. But to chart your private landscape is to change it to a public motorway. I shall keep something clear of autobahns.' "

My hand was under my mouth, and I made it all wet by smiling. I had to stay with my head down until I could control that smile. The Lord knows what possessed me to put down such things! When I was no longer smiling, I turned and found them both staring at me. Edwin, very pompously, came and took my pulse, which I know from the way my heart was going must have seemed very abnormal. He shook his head at Wolfram.

Wolfram came and stood over me. "You're not well," he said. "It's plain from this writing that you are not yourself. You will have to rest. I shall tell Edwin not to give you any more pens and paper for the time being."

This was awful. It took away the very thing I had been depending on. It was so horrible that I don't remember much of what I did next. All I know is that somehow I was over the other side of the room, where Wolfram must have retreated from me, hammering at him with both fists and shrieking: "I must have paper! I need pens! I shall go mad if I don't have them. Really mad! I don't need to rest. All I do here is rest. Let me have paper, you swine!" Wolfram was weakly holding up his arms to his face, too taken aback to do anything. And I went on hammering at him, hoping it would kill him.

Edwin came up behind saying things like, "Steady, steady. There's enough of that, now." And he grabbed me very expertly—do all prisoners get like this?—and hauled me away back to a chair. When he dumped me on it, I burst into tears, and howled like a baby with my fists in my eyes. Edwin, I remember, stood by with one hand heavily on my shoulder to keep me in place. And I think he thought Wolfram had mismanaged things, because he said, with much less respect than he usually uses to Wolfram: "Don't you know how to humour them? Here's I been humouring all this time, and you go and do this." I keep wondering how he thinks he has been humouring me, the old hypocrite.

Wolfram was very sulky and dusting himself as if I'd sullied him. "Violent bitch!" he said, and some more on those lines. Maybe Edwin

glared at him—Edwin has a line in malevolent glares that takes some equalling—for he said in the end: "Oh very well. Do what you like. I agree about the fuel and you can bring up some wine, but don't blame me if she scratches your eyes out one day." And then he took himself off, very hastily, shuddering a little.

I must remember to write Rational Prose for Wolfram in future. Thank the Lord I wrote his papers more clearly than my own, or he might have picked on something much more vital.

•

Edwin stood over me until I managed to stop crying. Then he told me rather roughly to get to bed and stay there. I went. I was exhausted anyway and I did not dare disobey for fear they put me in whatever they use for a straightjacket here. But, after a while, I heard the knobby trampling of young Hobby's boots, going in and out. Then Edwin knocked on the door and shouted: "Best come out and eat supper while it's hot." So I put on the cloak and dragged myself out—I felt as if I had fought several rounds against a heavyweight boxer—and there, of all the wonders, was a fire blazing again, food on the table considerably more appetising than any they had ever given me before, and, best of all, a pile of fresh paper, a bundle of quills and a supply of ink. Hobby was busy sharpening the penknife, presenting to me nothing but a head of uncombed hair, and Edwin was looking smug and modest in a dour kind of way. At the sight, particularly of the paper, I started to cry again.

"What's wrong?" said Edwin. "Not to your liking?"

I had to nod feverishly, to reassure him. The last thing I wanted to do was to make him angry. "Oh yes. It's all marvellous." At which I howled in earnest and seemed unable to stop. I must have been overwrought, I suppose. Anyway, Edwin called it that, and seemed not displeased, and made me sit down and drink some wine. Then he sent Hobby away, but insisted on standing over me himself to see to it that I ate. I had not the slightest desire to eat. I only wanted to be at this paper. As I packed in mouthful after unwanted mouthful, I continually found myself looking at it, longingly, and then being afraid that Edwin had seen my unusual eagerness. Perhaps he did, but he seems to put it down to my derangement—there is no doubt, I'm afraid, that he thinks me, to say the least of it, unbalanced. Perhaps I am, a little, though not as he imagines. At least I have the credit of being a mad *lady,* rather than a simple mad*woman*. A month ago I should not have been treated so well.

He went at last, and took the supper. But the fire and the lamp continued to burn. Vowing not to sit up beyond the time the fire died—they will notice if the lamp is unusually low in oil—I set to work with the penknife to saw a strip an inch wide off the bottom of each sheet of pa-

per. I am lucky. It *is* different paper, better quality too: the pens do not catch in it as they did in the other. So there is no reason why it should not be a different shape from the second supply (which is, anyway, different from the first). But the fact that it is a better quality makes it that much harder to saw through. The penknife is blunt as a stick now. I did not dare risk spoiling a sheet, since, though I could have burnt it, I am fairly sure they know how many sheets they gave me, and an absent one would be missed when Wolfram chooses to count them again. And a jagged sheet would show as badly. So it meant doing each one individually, and getting them straight first go. Lord, it took hours! And I got so tired that the last one I did in the night is wobbly from sheer weariness. I had to get up as soon as it was light and, wrapped in cloak and blanket and crouching on the floor in the whistling draught whose source I can't trace, finish the job then. I could not cut them on the table, since the cuts would show in the wood. Some show in the stone of the floor still, although I have rubbed dirt in and shuffled my feet on the spot for hours now. Mark is built of soft limestone—or my part is.

But at last I had a sheaf of thin strips of paper, just right to fold and push down inside a hobnailed boot. I hid all but one in various places around the rooms—some in the under-struts of the table, some in several parts of the bed (which never gets clean sheets, but perhaps might some day), and some in cracks in the stonework. The best place is one of the chairs, which is rickety and starting apart. I have packed it stable again with paper, and dirtied the edges so they will not show. When I came to write the note, I was shaking so with tension and exhaustion that I could hardly write for a while. I had to start a sheet of Rational Prose for Wolfram to steady my hand, but I did not dare be too long at it, because the sun was well up by then and I knew they would be in any minute with fuel and food. And, apart from anything else, this is the one time of day when I am certain to see Hobby. I hardly knew what to write, now it came to the point. I had to dash something down without thinking in the end. Hurriedly, but as clearly as I could write, I scribbled: "My name is Emily. I am from England. What is your name? Do take care in future—I hate them to hurt you." Then I heard them coming upstairs, and I had barely time to get the ink dry before I had to fold the paper and tuck it out of sight down my dress.

Oh, I thought Edwin would never give me a chance to pass it to Hobby. Usually, Edwin clumps about, leaving Hobby with me to light the fire. But that day he would have to hang about, surveying me musingly. I think I looked ill. I certainly do now. He must have been afraid of losing his prisoner irretrievably, I imagine, but I was far too impatient and agitated to see why he was staying. It seemed to me he knew all about

my note and was hoping I would give myself away. When you have a secret, you cannot believe that the rest of the world does not know all about it. In the end, I said rather desperately that I thought I would go back to bed.

"Aye," he said. "Do that." And he watched me off into the bedroom before he clumped away to unlock the yard door.

With my heart absolutely hammering, I stole out again and up to Hobby. He, to my everlasting relief, looked up with a bit of a grin as I came creeping into the room again, clearly expecting me, and held out his hand for the paper, in his nonchalant way, even before I had got it out of my dress.

"When can you get it to him?" I whispered, and, Lord, it sounded loud.

"Midday," he replied, quite casually, and much louder. He obviously knows just how much is audible. Hobby is an old campaigner, clearly. Interesting. I wish I knew more about our Hobby. He cannot be more than sixteen, but he has the lined, knowing face of a middle-aged man, poor kid. He stuffed the note in his boot, carelessly it seemed, yet there was a delicacy about the way he did it, not to crumple the paper, that suggested that mine was by no means only the second note to go into that great space beside his skinny ankle. I saw him do it, then I fled as quietly as my draperies would permit, back to bed. And I was glad to be there. It was a hideous effort to get out again for breakfast, as Edwin decreed I should. He says I shall get weak in bed. He may be right.

I have spent today between bed and here. It is a choice between freezing at rest or sitting strenuously upright and warm. Today there is the sharpest frost yet. But I had to go out into the yard this morning, all the same. I did not want my man to think the message had been discovered—and I know what I went through when he was not there. I would not have anyone go through that without a reason.

He was better today. He swung round the space with his earlier air entirely and, since the guards were sheltering again, we could look at one another most of the time. I admire the shape of his chin when he puts his head up to look over at me. But then his whole head is comely. I believe he must have thought I was unwell, just like Edwin, because he looked with a little jerk of the head when he first saw me. Then he smiled. He has a curious, growing, lingering smile that seems to come by stages, until his whole body has it, not merely his face. I wish I smiled that way. I smile quick and glad—and I know he cannot see my dimple from there. And to see him there, and well again, seemed to be all I could ask.

But at midday I could hardly contain myself. I could not believe Hobby could escape the surveillance of six guards—I have never seen more

than two at once, but they are seldom the same two. And I cursed the vagueness that hangs over all the doings and arrangements over there. I could imagine what it might be like, but I will not let myself—I don't know why. Yet I have a clear picture in my head of what his prison is. It is bound to be wrong, so I won't dwell on it. I would much rather have it vague.

Hobby came in with more fuel this afternoon. I am to be kept warm now. And, when Edwin's back was turned, he gave me a little nod. So he did it, bless him. I have been writing at this ever since. Oh I am glad, but I feel hectic and foolish too. My note seems pitiful. Whatever possessed me to say I was from England? I can't imagine it will mean a thing to him. And the foolish fussy way I told him to take care. I almost wish I'd never sent it. I wonder if he felt the same after going to such lengths to send me his. And the fool I am! I tell him to take care, then ask him his name, so that he has to go through it all again to get more paper. Insensate ass you are, Emily. Let him ignore me. I'd rather not know his name, not at that price.

•

No strength to write today

•

Nor today

•

Better today. But ye gods! I've been here three months now! This is the third time I have had all the embarrassment of explaining to Edwin that I need the wad of flannel he provides. This time, there were no innuendoes about staunching, thank God! Either my rank is supposed to put me above such talk, or he has grown tired of it. But the amazing thing is the way I lost count. Perhaps it was wilful. I was determined not to make a set of notches anywhere, nor to date this writing. But I am still incredulous at the way I have been blithely writing "A month ago" when it was two months or more when Hilda the bitch hustled me into this. It must be December now—though I don't think they name the months as we do. Edwin has been talking of Yule, which they have instead of Christmas, being heathens, I suppose. Yule is close, it seems. There is a bitter frost still, and Wolfram has allowed Hobby to put a brazier in my bedroom. I have been in there most of this last week, unwell, though what illness it was I have no idea. Edwin calls it "Jail fever" and claims he saw it coming on. I think it was distress over that message. And it was foolish, I know, to go outside with whatever it was, but I could not let him think anything had happened to me. Then, the second day I went, Edwin came in unexpectedly and caught me out there, and that was the end of that for the time being. My man—I should not still call him that—saw Edwin

before I did and walked out of sight at once, with a cool I hope I equalled. Because I realised from that there was something wrong and went right onto the far end of the courtyard before I turned round to see. I think Edwin thought I was going to jump off, because he was after me quicker than I have ever seen him move before. He dragged me in, and he has kept the door locked until today, when I have given him my solemn oath that I do not intend to make away with myself. A very solemn oath, on his gods and mine, which I suppose I shall have to keep.

Dear, I feel weak and weary. I shall have to write the rest tomorrow.

•

Oh, much better today, and a third note, very concerned. This I must answer and give to Hobby tomorrow. I'll do it last thing at night, as a grand luxury. Hobby brought the second note the morning I fell ill and thrust it at me while he was removing the primitive bucket-closet from my bedroom. I could hardly believe he could have gone through that again so soon. That was why I went out that morning, and he was there, unharmed. He must have done as I did and secreted a supply of paper. This was just such a scrap of paper as the first. It said: "My name is Asgrim and I shall take care, now I have a reason for it. Why have they shut you up here if you are not from this land?"

I did not find that note easy to answer. It was rather a shock to find his name was the one most prominent among Wolfram's questions, and equally perturbing to find him puzzled about why I am here. Somehow, I had a notion that he would know why. I had to flog myself into action to reply, no doubt because I was ill, but also because his question rent me apart with uncertainties and self-distrust. I said in the end: "I don't know why I am here, but I hope to find out." Then I paused for a long time, knowing this was too curt to send on its own, but not having the face to reply in kind to his "now I have a reason for it." I should have done. I could have done. There are so many things I almost said, and I didn't dare. This is a great Prince, after all. And men seem to find that kind of thing easier to say than women. I don't know why. At last, when Hobby was actually clumping upstairs, I dashed down: "I am everlastingly grateful for the cloak" and left it at that. And having left it, was sorry.

The effort of composing that exhausted me. I could do nothing else. But all the time I was ill, the worst part by far was the trouble raised by his name and his question. His name *is* Hathriver. I don't know why I had not realised before who he must be. But now I know, it has all fallen together in my head, Wolfram's hints and questions and Edwin's jumbled monologues, and I see that he is indeed a great man. It is not merely that he heads a faction. He was the inspiration of a movement, and he gave it his character. Without him, it must be less than nothing. Hrinkle and

Regan, though not yet secure, are virtually now only mopping up the remaining opposition. And it is hideously clear that as soon as they *are* secure, Asgrim of Hathriver will be quietly done away with. I have begun to pray for guerrilla warfare and the uprising of thralls. Let us have some stiff-necked opposition from minor patricians. I hope even Hilda prospers, so long as the mopping-up can be prolonged. I wish I knew how he came to be reduced to this hopeless incarceration. It seems such cruel luck. And here he is wasting his energies sneaking notes to someone like me. It is too bad.

I have found myself dwelling on my own pointless existence. It made last week horrible. Round and round. On and on. When I saw his question written, I saw, like the sun coming blazing through clouds, that I need not really be here at all. It was simple timorous inadequacy that caused me not to explain, if not to Smooth-one, at least to Wolfram, clearly and strenuously, who I am and what had happened. If I had done that straight away, I should not be here now. But I let people push me about, and then I got involved in this ridiculous attempt to pretend to high birth. Me! Fancy! I never knew I was a snob before. Now I am too deep in for any explanation. They suspect me of God knows what. And if I did explain, my account of why I held my tongue for so long is going to seem more than inadequate: it is going to sound like lies. And I know perfectly well that it *is* my duty to explain—I am wasting the time and energy of Edwin, Hobby and Wolfram, using fuel and food, and quite simply continuing an imposture. All my reasons why I should *not* explain are the dreariest rationalisations of the fact that, if I went from here, I should not be able to see a sliver of a courtyard and a man walking in it.

Was anything more gross? Nothing, perhaps, except the lies I told Wolfram while I was lying in bed. He came, reluctantly, but fancying, I am sure, that he might get his answers if he bullied me when I was down. I had been dreading this. I knew he would come. He does not consider me as anything more than an animate object. But when he came it was unexpectedly easy. I gave exactly the same answers, without turning a hair, even to the question Had I ever had a message from Asgrim? It has become simply mechanical reaction. And I even felt it was funny that I should have become guilty after the event, as it were. Wolfram kicked a chair in his frustration and slid away. He has not been back since.

I regard myself as a confirmed sinner and hardened imposter. I believe one should be open with oneself. Things have come to a pretty pass if one has to deceive oneself as well as other people. One should be one's own last stronghold of truth. Odd, though, that I couldn't drag the truth out of myself unaided. It took the integrity of that man over there to do it.

This third note says: "Did your jailor see me? Or are you ill? I would give much to see you safe and well." I have rather clung to that last sentence today after Edwin's depressing interlude. Asgrim has been anxious and he has missed me. He may even have gone through all the hell of vague horrors that I did after he stole the paper. And, since he cannot have an unlimited quantity of paper secreted, he must want to know what has happened quite badly, or he would not have sent. I wonder why he couldn't ask Hobby. Or did he simply want another word from me? Anyway, I gave him that word, this morning, by Hobby, the product of much pen-spoiling last night. You can't chew a quill, naturally, so I find I draw them back and forth between my fingers when I am stuck for words, until they look mangy and go floppy. I wrote: "I have been ill, but, as you saw yesterday, I am better now. I was refused pen and paper, and that made me ill, since I was afraid I would not be able to answer you."

Now, I think that was over-effusive, rash and forward. He might well be glad that a hundred-foot drop separates us, if I am going to be that emotional. Not emotional in words, I know, I know, but by implication. To show that I was so set on replying to him. That was the rash thing. But then I didn't know what I know now. Even so, I should have recollected that he was a great Prince and not shown myself so fawningly eager to oblige him.

•

I had better have this out with myself. My habit of running several days' writing into one section is designed to confuse my sense of time and confound Wolfram, not to bury the truth from myself. The truth of the matter is that I wish I had not sent that last note. It is all Edwin's fault for deciding I need cheering up.

Edwin came in early yesterday afternoon, quite out of routine, and instead of hanging about jangling his keys like he usually does, he draws up a chair to the fire, sits his unhygienic person on it, and squanders half my remaining wood on getting a good blaze. Then, rubbing his hands and smiling, he said I looked peaky and down in the mouth and he was going to cheer me up with a little cosy chat.

I said, as kindly as I could—I could see he meant well—that it was very good of him, and gave an internal, imaginary scream at the thought of hearing about his daughter's ingratitude again. The truly dreadful thing about being in prison is that people can come and talk at you and you can do nothing to stop them. And, feeling I needed something to help me through Elsie and her sins, I suggested we both drank some wine. I have a thick green bottle of wine, which I have hardly touched till now.

"I never say no to wine," says Edwin. I rather thought he didn't. So I poured it out, and I remember leaning patiently (but I hope politely)

back in the chair, sipping and enjoying the fire, while Edwin got his monologue launched. "Yule's nearly here," he said. "Folks will be seeing their folks soon. I'll be having Elsie and her man with me, more fool I." Upon which, I waited for the history of what Elsie had had from Edwin and not given back, and how her man had backed her up; but I think Edwin suddenly realised that I was not likely to see any of my folks that Yule and was moved by a sort of craggy tact to dismiss Elsie from his discourse for once. Anyway, with one of his liquid coughs, he veered off from Elsie and onto Yule, and the arrangements for Yule in the stronghold. There is to be junketting below, it seems. Wolfram is not invited to it, poor creature. But the soldiers were none of them allowed leave, this year, to their disgust, and are determined to be as lively as they can in spite of it. (To my mind, they are quite lively enough anyway. There are drunken songs roared out every evening.) I gather Edwin hopes to get drunk in their company, whatever Elsie has to say about it. But he was sorry, he said, for the guard over the way. They were not allowed a moment's relaxation.

And so he got onto Asgrim. He never mentions him by name. I did wonder why, but now I have come to suspect that it is a backhanded mark of respect. Edwin regards a man's name as a potent part of him, and saying it seems to him something like an invocation. Asgrim, even shut up and guarded unceasingly, is still a very powerful enemy. To say his name would be to Edwin as strongly unlucky as quoting *Macbeth* in a theatre. So he says "over the way" and "that one," and jerks his thumb to make his meaning clear.

Well, "over the way" having money, it seems, is to keep Yule in style. This is good. It adds an air of comfort to my vague imaginings of privation over there. I hope he has been allowed to make his prison generally cheerful. While I was taking this in, I found Edwin rambling off upon the privileges and duties of rank, which, he seems to think, are to make oneself as showy as possible in order to bring richness and ceremonial to the eye of those less privileged. Right, in a way, I suppose. Mankind seems to need objects of admiration.We treat millionaires and filmstars with indulgence for giving us glamour, distantly. But he was on the wrong tack for Asgrim. Even Wolfram is showier than Asgrim. So I was forced to give Edwin a few covert nudges to bring him back to "over the way" again. And he came back on the same subject in a new place, never noticing my hints or his inconsistencies at all.

"Funny to think he was to have married the Lady Hilda this Yule, if all had gone well with him," he said.

"*Was* he to?" I said, with inane brightness. "*Do* tell." And my heart went thump down. Edwin went droning on, and I really believe I never

said another word until he got up to go. And, having written it, I don't want to add another written word either.

•

No, I have to go on. I can't sleep, so I am ruining my eyes trying to write by lamplight. If I make myself ill again I don't care. Perhaps it is not so bad after all. From Edwin's sketchy and jumbled droning, I think Asgrim was negotiating to marry Hilda, but, whether because he was imprisoned or for some other reason, things never reached the point of a firm contract. What does that matter? It simply shows that the life of the great ones is another matter from mine—or Edwin's. I do wish it hadn't been Hilda of all people, but what is more fitting, now I think about it? The wretched woman is extremely good-looking (though she'd be a yammering ninny in bed) and no doubt a great lady. The alliance would bring her party alongside Hathriver, I suppose, and more power to his elbow. Very fitting match, very fitting, very necessary. Oh damn it.

Why carry on like this over a thoughtfully sent cloak and three little letters? Emily, you are a presumptuous fool. Remember by rights it should have been Hilda in this place anyway. And that, now I think, was a little fiendish of Regan and Uncle—Uncle thought of it, I bet. To have your betrothed—or nearly betrothed—flaunted at you, so near and yet so far, across a hundred-foot drop. That is really twisting the knife. I'm glad it was a perfect stranger instead, heartily glad. I have done some good.

It only remains to get myself into some kind of order. I have been trying to do so by going back over the wording of the three notes, disregarding the emotion I packed round them. I am afraid there is still something. There is "My Lady" and "now I have a reason." But, hell, Emily, get shut up in prison for months and then see a pretty girl over the way. Most men would feel a twinge. And the third note, which I had the effrontery to call concerned, is coolness itself really—the query of a decent man who thought he might just inadvertently have caused trouble for a friend.

And I have gone over his bearing, particularly when I saw him the morning Edwin unlocked the door again. He jumped when he saw me. It was clear he had not expected to see me. But he didn't smile—though I did, the fool—until just before he went in. But then it was mild weather again and the guards were very observant. Oh it is impossible to tell what he thought. How can you tell from this distance anyway? The fire is dead. I shall have to go to bed or freeze.

•

And now I *am* mad. Really crazy. I am trying to make myself regret what I did and I can't. I am in a frenzy of hope and feel as if I have staked my last halfpenny.

You can get into this odd state. You can do a thing when you thought nothing could be further from your intentions. You mean to do nothing, and yet, before you have caught yourself, the strip of paper is in your hand, the thing is written, and you are handing it to Hobby. Hobby looked rather surprised too. And so cunning had my worse nature been, that it was only written just before Edwin and Hobby came in, and my better, prudent nature had no say in the matter at all. Nor has it still. And I shall have to wait till tomorrow morning to know. Twenty-two great hours. I blame the frost. I woke early, aching with cold, and got up in dreary agitation to watch a smoky sun up over the roofs, setting them glittering because of the ice on them. My worse nature had plenty of time to work on me.

I just hope my note doesn't strike Asgrim as blatantly as I intended it. "I must tell you," wrote this crazy fool, "that I am not a lady by birth. I know you are a great man, and I know, too, that Hilda should have been in this prison in my place." Get the implications of that one! The man would be a fool not to. And he is certainly no fool. What I shall get back—if I get anything—will be a cold "Lady, I think you must still be unwell." Oh why did I *do* it?

•

Asgrim has not had the note yet—if, that is, Hobby gets it to him at midday as he did the others—so, when I saw him just now, he was risking a little cordiality. My note about my illness didn't offend him. But what will he think about this next one, hard on its heels? The guards were stamping their feet and blowing their fingers, which preoccupied them. Asgrim smiled over at me and seemed to have his hands tucked under his arms. I saw that, because he slipped a little on the frosty floor of the yard, and threw out an arm involuntarily, and it was all tangled in his cloak. At which he grinned over at me—"Don't think I'm always this ridiculous: it's just the cold." I was sliding up and down with my hands on the coping, and I tried to smile back. It was a nervous baring of teeth. In spite of the cold, I stayed still and looked at him carefully—as I shall never dare come out and see him again. He still has his air of integrity. His face is full of private thoughts and decided notions, and, I suppose, personal dignity. I can see only too well how that dignity could become hauteur towards someone who had angered him. No, I shan't come and look at him tomorrow. He will not want anything to do with me. And he went in with a cheerful nod to me, not knowing what I have done.

•

Oh now this is too much. Much more than I deserve. This is evil paid with good, seven times over. Hobby brought me *two* slips of paper with the afternoon fuel, and I have never been so happy in my life. The

first was the note: "What has Hilda or your birth to do with it? I am head over ears in love with you. Tell me how I came to anger you." The other is a poem:

Unbounded truth is not a thing
Cramped to time and bound in place.
It strangely changes space,
Enlarging laws to loyalty
And making words reality,
And stones words or nothing.
The boundaries containing me
Are wider than the world, by grace
Of truth, which is another thing.

•

God, I am so happy I have been singing ever since Edwin left after cheering me up about his daughter. I have my reply all ready. It goes: "You have made me very happy indeed. I was not angry. My jailor had told me you were betrothed to Hilda." That, I hope, should make him something like as happy as he has made me—but when I think over my other answers, they are all so cautious and formal that no one would think I was a feeling being. What makes me so unable to come out into the open? He has. I must learn to go straighter for this truth he so values. Of course "truth" has many meanings. I hope he intends them all. In future I shall try not to be devious about it. Fear makes me devious—as it may most women, I think.

•

The answer went this morning, but I wonder if Asgrim has been able to attend to it. I had no idea he was a widower, none at all. But then I know so little about him. Anyway, this morning I went out as usual, when the time came. Asgrim was out there already, and his son was with him.

The two were in the middle of the courtyard, visible to waist-level, laughing excitedly and taking some object continually one from another. First Asgrim would have it—"I'm older than you: I know all about these things"—then the boy would wrest it back—"Trust you to do it wrong. I'm the expert and it goes like this. Oh. No. It doesn't. Here, you try." And Asgrim would have it back. And despite all their trying, the thing simply failed to work. It looked as if they were too glad to see one another to bend their minds to it properly. They were in continual fits of laughter. Asgrim was laughing when he saw me. He gave me a wonderfully happy smile from almost beneath his shoulder, while he bent over the object—which seemed to be all colours of the rainbow and no shape I had ever seen—and I could gladly have leaped the drop and joined them

there, so splendid was it to see them happy. All I could do was laugh too. While I was laughing, Asgrim said something to the boy. I would take a bet it was: "Don't look now, but that's the lady I told you about over there."

The boy didn't look. He was far too busy doing something with string to the colourful object, but he gave a little nod, preoccupied. I would put him at twelve or thirteen, and a splendidly light-hearted, energetic, matter-of-fact, jolly, *boyish* boy he seems, in spite of being a prisoner. There are no doubts about him, no nonsense, no adolescence really yet—just a mite of a lordly air, which you would expect in the son of a patrician. He and Asgrim are not very much alike. It is odd how rarely children markedly resemble their parents. He has inherited his father's comely build. Though he is skinny with it, the broad shoulders are there. But his hair is several shades lighter—and remarkably fine, glossy hair it is—and his face a brown and snubby one, though good-looking enough in its way, because his eyes are strikingly large.

While they were tussling with their toy, I had a look to see how the guards were taking it. There were three—one extra for the boy, I suppose—sheltering under the opposite wall from the extremely brisk wind and looking a little less like zombies than usual. I almost suspected them of taking an interest in the toy, and—it's hard to express—but it looked as if the boy had stirred them up a bit. Anyway, Asgrim suddenly began walking away backwards with the object, and, when he had reached the wall, he threw it in the air. The boy was holding a string, and the thing proved to be a kite, of a size and complexity I had never seen before. And up it went, with that round and round plunging movement, struggling its way up over the roofs, long and colourful, in a way that lifted your heart to see. I could hear them cheering. I nearly cheered too. "Oh, great!" I said. The guards were watching it too, as if they liked it. Asgrim seemed to be going to look at me to see what I thought. Then, somehow, he didn't. He looked firmly away. And before I could feel hurt, I found the reason in Edwin's liquid cough, just behind my left shoulder.

Well, there I was caught avidly intent on the courtyard opposite. There was no point in concealing it. "There's a boy over there," I said to Edwin. "With a kite." As if he had no eyes.

Edwin spat, and the wind caught his dottle of spit and splashed it on the roof. "I know," he said. "I came up to get a sight of him. Fine lad, ain't he?"

"Yes," I said. "Who is he?"

"His son. Kiartan. They fetched him from Markwater for Yule, for a week, to show him he's in one piece. That's where they keep him—

Markwater—under lock and key. And if he tries any tricks, Kiartan's a goner, see." And, to make quite sure I saw, Edwin would have to draw his hand across his throat and deliver a croak with it.

Now this is too bad—though, I suppose, only to be expected when a man like Smooth-one has his hands on both. I can hardly bear to think of the strain it must put on Asgrim, and the need to be docile and cautious. And that child should be barging about the countryside letting off energy, not cooped up like this. The only good thing about it is that the boy does not look as if they are unkind to him—though you can see he is in a holiday mood just now. No doubt he's a little more sober alone. But I now value those messages even more highly, since Asgrim must have known the risk to Kiartan.

I think Kiartan must have noticed his father carefully not looking at me, and I think it is clear that the restraints he is under vex him more than somewhat. Quite as clearly, he plays on his childhood and considerable charm to break out of restraints whenever he can. If being a captive has taught him this, then it is another bad thing—though I can neither blame him nor grumble at the outcome. Kiartan took a look at Asgrim gazing unmeaningfully at the roofs, and his face bunched up a little, rebelliously. Then he took a look across at me—quite a long look, sideways, to see what I was like. He seemed to like what he saw. Most kids do like me, which was one reason why I gave up teaching: they mobbed and they clamoured, not unkindly but quite uncontrollably. Kiartan, in a cool way that makes me laugh to remember, then hitches the kite-string round his wrist and goes marching into a spot where I get the fullest view of him. Then, deliberately, with a vivid but slightly artificial smile, he waved his arm at me and yelled: "Hallo!"

Asgrim was shattered, and extremely angry with him at first, I think. There was nothing I could do but wave back and shout "Hallo!" too. Edwin also waved, chirpily, and called out: "Hallo there, lad!" The old snob. He doesn't treat Hobby so kindly.

Asgrim looked rather nervously at the guards to see what they thought of this sociability, and they shrugged a little—"Boys will be boys." At that, I think the fun of it dawned on Asgrim. That smile of his grew on his face, and he came up beside his son and waved too, almost more defiantly than Kiartan. Then he and Kiartan looked at one another and found it ever so funny. They bent about, howling with laughter. I could not help laughing too. To think that communicating was that simple after all! They brought their kite down by laughing. It fell on a roof and dropped down the intervening pit, whence they had to haul it up, and, when it was up, the guards evidently decided they were enjoying them-

selves too much and marched them indoors. Both of them waved again as they went.

Edwin followed me indoors. Now the ice is broken and we are officially on speaking terms with "over the way," he is much more communicative. I have the history of their capture. It is all that young devil Kiartan's fault, too. I might have guessed. Asgrim was not likely to have let himself be taken alone. He is far too canny. In fact, it seems that he is so cunning both in diplomacy and warfare, and so apt to turn up where he is least expected, that they call him "the old Fox." Edwin used this phrase, nervously, crossing his fingers against bad luck and looking over his shoulder in Asgrim's direction, as if it were used so often that it almost amounted to the man's name.

As for their capture, Edwin gave me a ravelled history of a set of battles between Asgrim's side and Hrinkle's—or they may have been mere skirmishes. He told me the place and outcome of each, but they meant nothing to me, until the last, which seems to have been in the neighbourhood of Hathriver itself. Asgrim won this encounter, this is the irony of it. Regan and Rinkle were somehow penned against a hill in a heap of wounded and forced to give in. It ought to have been decisive. And it looks as if Asgrim thought it *was* decisive, because he made certain conditions and then let Regin and Wrinkle go. Edwin thinks this very stupid of him, considering the outcome, but my reading of it is that Asgrim was hoping to generate good will by his clemency. He had no idea that Kiartan was there.

Kiartan, it seems, since the engagement was so near home, had taken part in it too. Or at least gone to watch. No doubt he thought it would be exciting, and he certainly got more excitement than he could have bargained for. Edwin has it that he took part in things to such purpose that he got hurt and the man with him had to go and ask Asgrim to help him. Whatever happened, it seems clear that Kiartan was sitting on the hill above the battlefield, that Regin and Rinkle met him when they trailed away from their defeat, and that Asgrim found out belatedly that Kiartan was there. Uncle, being a great opportunist, snapped Kiartan up on the spot. Edwin has them parley amusingly, Kiartan unwisely and indignantly protesting that his father was on the way to help him, and Uncle remarking that this was a stroke of luck. And he promptly set an ambush. Asgrim came tearing up the hill a few minutes later, knowing that Kiartan was sitting in Wrinkle's path, and fell into the ambush. Edwin tells me that this outcome was a further stroke of luck for the Mark party. In the normal way, Asgrim would have come with a band of picked and trusted men—for whom the word seems to be *hearthmen*—but he had been in

too much of a hurry to collect them. Those he had collected seem to have been raff and scaff and they ran away, leaving both Asgrim and Kiartan in Hrinkle's hands, and enabling Hrinkle to turn total defeat into a resounding victory.

I can hardly imagine a more depressing reverse. If I had been Asgrim I would have gone mad. I can't think how he manages to behave with such dignity—I suppose it's the last thing left.

•

It is astonishing that Asgrim has time to think of me too. I would quite forgive him for thinking of nothing but Kiartan—particularly as Kiartan is clearly living it up a little over there. I could hear his voice from time to time, even through these walls, as I was writing. And they were out there again just before nightfall. Kiartan was tearing round the yard shouting, behaving childishly for thirteen, screaming with that kind of raucous excitement which is not far off brute fury, and plainly so bottled up and sick of confinement that my heart ached for him. He has nothing to do but resort to childishness. I could see Asgrim knew it. He was watching very soberly from between two guards. They were not letting him take exercise—Oh dear no: routine did not permit it—although they stretched a point for Kiartan, I suspect because life would have become impossible in there if they hadn't.

Asgrim saw me come out to see what the noise was about and gave me a small friendly wave. It horrified me for a second, because I forgot we were now on speaking-terms. But the guards have accepted the precedent, it seems, for they made no objection. I waved back, and to Kiartan too, who hurtled by, waving back almost viciously, poor kid. No wonder they let him come out. Yet, somehow, amidst all the clamour over there, Asgrim has found time and application to send me another note—maybe the very disturbance makes it easier to do. It was a very, very small scrap of paper and it just said: "You have made me rarely so happy." A month ago—no, *no—three* months ago, that would have puzzled me, or I would have got it slightly wrong. Now I know that "rarely so" means "intensely" or, anyway, something stronger than "very." Edwin's feet are always "rarely so painful"—and I used to think he was saying "really so" for weeks.

But I fear this might well be the last note I get. I have not of course been able to put them all together, but I have a feeling that if I were to do so they would amount to a complete sheet of paper. I think he just hid a whole sheet and took the consequences. He is too well observed to do as I did. And the poem was wasteful—he wrote it out formally and it took twice the usual quantity. If my foolish fishing note is to be blamed for anything, it is for causing him to squander nearly a third of a page on me at one go.

•

He's too good—rarely so good—and much quicker than I am to spot where the advantage lies. It's Yule today, it seems. Edwin claims that it is the shortest day in the year—with what truth I am not sure: I have lost count thoroughly. Anyway, it is dark and leaden, and dawn came late. Night is coming already. I can hardly see to write. If I crane round by the window, I can just see the tip of the orange sun, sinking. The junketting below is already getting under way, by the sound of it: there is a lot of crashing about and laughter, which echoes rather heavily up here.

Edwin came in this morning unexpectedly—while I was writing about poor Kiartan, in fact—quite pink with good spirits, saying that Elsie and her man had come and would I forgive him if he didn't come and cheer me up this afternoon. I said of course I would forgive him, although, in fact, I have come to value these sessions for what I can learn of Hathriver. Whereupon Edwin, overjoyed, apparently, by my good nature (he seems to forget it was he who took it upon himself to inaugurate these sessions), goes hopping briskly out again and returns with a great bunch of holly and some ivy, which he says it is the custom to have.

I said it was the same in the North too, and thanked him several times. I don't think he realises what it means to have living green leaves in one's hands again. I could have cried. I had forgotten how glossy and stiff holly can be, and how green its stems. The red of the berries is the clearest and sweetest colour. As for ivy—I had never considered before the delicate veined shape of its leaves, or how specially dissimilar it is from holly, both in its duller gloss and more supple texture. The two plants seem each to be from a different world—both different again from mine.

And while I was fingering them incredulously and sniffing their vegetable pungency, Edwin remarked that Well, he must be off, and it was nice to know that the strange people of the North had the same customs too. To which I replied—I don't know why, unless it was involuntary truthfulness—that we didn't keep Yule exactly. And he wondered loudly what on earth we did with ourselves instead. I was forced to prevarication, rather than embark on an exposition of Christianity—which I can't imagine Edwin ever taking in, not in a month of Sundays.

"We keep Hogmanay," I said. "When the days have just begun to lengthen." He departed more than ever convinced that we were barbarians, and in such a bustle of good humour at his daughter's coming, that I am forced to conclude that Elsie, ungrateful or not, must be dear to him. Then I heard Kiartan over the way, and put down the sheaf of greenstuff and went out.

Kiartan appeared to have settled down a little today. When I came out, the two of them were walking in the yard, talking happily together, and Kiartan was only exhibiting the confinement of his energies in the

odd reel and skip, or the occasional little clowning stagger, as I have seen boys do in bus queues or other irksome situations. That child has the most beautiful hair. It is very fine and straight and smooth and, although neither dark nor fair, it has the quality of catching light to itself, so that it shone even on a drear day like today. It is a delight to look at. I think Asgrim finds it so too. He looks at the boy with a kind of proud admiration, and he several times seized some excuse or other to put his hand on Kiartan's head. It was clear to me he was very happy this morning. His whole walk was different and he smiled most of the time. But, for all that, I get the impression that his behaviour to his son is not simply unmitigated indulgence.

There was an occasion when Kiartan, in his clowning, contrived to overbalance and, with much windmilling of his arms, to stagger onto the feet of one of the guards—who looked both peevish and long-suffering. Asgrim, though he was still smiling, said something quiet and plainly a little cutting. And Kiartan got up at once, looking a little soberly. I have a feeling that the decrease in Kiartan's noise is Asgrim's doing. He waited, I fancy, to see if Kiartan, having let off steam, would then sober down of his own accord, and, from last night's showing, Kiartan plainly did not. All the signs were that he was working himself up to be uncontrollable. Then I think Asgrim put his foot down. The guards must be relieved. In an odd way, I think Kiartan is relieved too. I think he has been with people who were only concerned to keep him from escaping, who may have treated him not unkindly but who have clearly no authority in their dealings with him. His father has both authority and standards. People of Kiartan's age need that—not that they admit it readily. Kiartan made a face behind Asgrim's back—the perfunctory, obligatory grimace of the boy rebuked.

It was about then that Asgrim saw I had come out. I was leaning against the wall watching them, and Asgrim, noticing me, looked glad. It seemed unfeigned and incautious gladness; for he pulled himself together at once and gave me a formal little wave—with, I noticed, a quick look over at the guards, who were just then watching Kiartan and, possibly, controlling a snigger or so at the face he had made. Kiartan saw me too and was shy. Having been hauled over the coals for his vicious hilarity, he was not sure how to behave at all. He waved, with a sort of flop of the hand, and looked at his father for guidance.

And Asgrim took my breath away—and probably Kiartan's and the guards' too—by walking as near as he could and still see me and then shouting across to me: "Happy Yule!" Even bellowing, at that distance, he has a remarkably pleasant voice. Some men bray shouting: Asgrim does not. It was a very fine yell, glad and whole-hearted, which put me in mind

of nothing so much as a day I once spent in Cambridge. The students had some kind of event on, and I heard them continually shouting light-hearted things to one another in the streets. I suppose I mean that Asgrim has a young voice, but that is not quite it. I mean to say more that he threw himself into that shout, the way those students did. He made damn sure I heard him.

I shouted back: "Thank you. Happy Yule to you," not at all sure I made such good hearing. I shout high and windy. But I was so pleased to hear him and so amused at the cheek of it, that I think I sounded joyful too.

Then he shouted: "How are you keeping the time?" and I did not understand what he meant straight away. I had a moment when I insanely wondered how he knew my watch was with an English pawnbroker, and while I wondered, he shouted again, amplifying: "Have you any good things? Any money?"

That embarrassed me a little, but I felt I must reply. So I yelled: "I'm all right. I've got some holly and some ivy."

For some reason, this amused him vastly. He turned to Kiartan, and Kiartan laughed heartily too. For the rest of the time they were out there they kept turning to me and laughing—not at all unkindly, but I felt foolish, because I still cannot see why my answer should have been so funny.

Well, it came to an end and they had to go as usual. I went in here, where it is very quiet and lonely, not really having much heart to go on writing. Most of the morning I wandered about sticking up holly and ivy over the fireplace and windows and trying to pretend it was Christmas—which it may be, for all I know—and while I was doing it I found myself smiling again and again at the way Asgrim had seized on the fact that we were officially acquainted and could exchange real, public words. And what better excuse than season's greetings, shouted to the other prisoner? Natural courtesy, of course. Not that one can go far at the top of one's voice, but it is better than nothing. It seemed to me, from the way he shouted the moment he saw me, that he had decided on it beforehand and was putting his plan into operation before anyone thought to stop him. And it worked. The guards had another established precedent on their hands before they got their breath back.

•

But I had not seen the full extent of the plan—for I am now sure this was what it was—until the afternoon, when Wolfram suddenly appeared, very sullen and disdainful (for Edwin, it seemed, was off duty entertaining the ungrateful Elsie), ushering Hobby (who is never off duty). And Hobby was doubled up under a great hamper, which he was carrying on his shoulders, and which he slung on the floor as if his knees had given beneath it.

"This is for you," says Wolfram. "From Asgrim." And his manner went on to say "And I can't *think* what possessed him," as clearly as if he had spoken. "You are to unpack it in my sight, if you please."

I suppose it was inevitable that he would want to see what the hamper held, and it took the edge off my pleasure a little. But at least I did not blush. Wolfram was so fed up at having the bother of trudging up here with Hobby, that he deduced it all to an ordinary, tedious business, and no blushing matter. Edwin would have made such a to-do that he would have had me scarlet within seconds. All the same, it was irritating to have Wolfram there, sighing and sulking and picking his pimples all the time I was unpacking this fantastic cornucopia of good things. And it was almost as irritating to have poor Hobby kneel there and follow every item with his eyes like a hungry dog. I tried not to be annoyed. I am sure he had never seen such a spread, any more than I had. But I did so want to gloat in peace.

There is so much. Oranges, apples, several kinds of meat cured and seasoned in a way I have never come across before, jars of ginger, pots and boxes of crystallised fruit, things that seem to be flower-petals sugared, biscuits, shortbread, gingerbread, things like bakewell tarts full of almonds, raisins by the bunch, nuts, and a number of dark, wet fruit-cakes, so spicy and so full of black fruit that you would take them for Christmas pudding if they were not also most stickily iced. I have no idea what to call them, but they are delicious, utterly delicious. I have almost sated my craving for sugar on them. Then there are two stone-like bottles of dark sweet wine, rather musky stuff, a little like port. I think I got drunk on it last night. I have a headache today.

These things I pulled out, thing after thing, and Hobby's eyes went to and fro, to and fro, wider with every box and jar. There was also a note, pinned to a pudding-cloth, very formal, written slow, with flourishes: "Lady, please to have these, with Yuletide's greetings. Asgrim." I could see at once that this was official stuff, for public exhibition. I could not resist pushing it under Wolfram's nose and saying: "There. Now I shall have to say Yes next time you ask me if I ever had a message from Asgrim." And he grinned feebly, as if he thought this in bad taste. Maybe it was.

Then, about the middle, I came upon a small spray of leaves, evergreen, a little like privet in shape but very pleasant to smell; and wrapped round the stalk was another note, with untidy flourishes, which said: "Greetings from Kjarten." And I thought: "Bless me, I've been spelling his name wrong!" and was extremely touched. I felt, and still feel, that those leaves are significant in some way, but I cannot find out how. Edwin has a hangover today twenty times as bad as mine and is not in the mood to tell me anything—all he can do is snarl: I have hardly spoken two

words to him. I asked Wolfram what leaves they were. But he said, with great superiority, that he could not say. Whereupon Hobby piped up, hoarsely, and said (I think): "That's alvery, that is." Which left me no wiser.

But poor Hobby. When the things were all piled on the table, he looked at them so wistfully as he took up the empty hamper that I felt the greediest monster in the world. And Hobby has done so much for me, after all. So I said: "Hobby, would you like some of these things?" He just dropped the hamper and held out both hands cupped together, with the widest, daftest smile I have ever seen, even from him. I loaded his fists with as much as they would take—almost a little of everything, he spread his fingers so avidly wide. How he got downstairs with that lot and the hamper I shall never know, for Wolfram would not have lifted a finger if Hobby pitched down three flights and broke his neck. Wolfram is too clear about his superior status. But, in fact, Hobby struggled off alone, because I heard Kiartan (spelt wrong again) just then and went tearing out into the yard to wave and say Thank you. Wolfram sauntered after me to make sure that only the barest greetings were exchanged.

Kiarten was there alone at first, very excited because it was snowing a little—breathless, undecided snow, not likely to lie. "Look, it's snowing!" he shouted.

"Yes, but it won't stay," I shouted.

"Want to bet?" yells he.

And I was just going to call out to say to tell his father Thank you, when Asgrim himself came out and shouted: "Did you get the things?"

To which I tried to put into a single yell how delighted I was and how grateful. Asgrim made a gesture, as much as to say "It was nothing," and was smiling, when Wolfram, to my fury and indignation, told me I must go inside. I certainly did not dare disobey. And my heart sank as I went, because it looks as if Wolfram has decided to nip our sociability in the bud. He was out there some minutes longer bawling at the guards, saying they were to take their prisoners in at once. I don't know how much authority he has over there. He plainly enjoys hectoring people. But it sounded, as far as I could hear, as if the guards objected to him bullying them like that and retorted that they would bring their charges in in their own good time. I get the feeling that people resent Wolfram. I do. Edwin treats him with veiled contempt too. But Wolfram, curse it, has authority over me. He has stopped me calling out twice now. He was up here this morning as well, needlessly, not even asking questions, just kicking about in the snow and shivering, simply, as far as I can see, to make sure that I did not even say "Good morning." Oh how I hate Wolfram. If he comes this afternoon as well I shall hit him again.

Kjarten has won his half-made bet. It snowed in the night, not heavily, but enough to lime the roofs and crust the walls and make the whole stronghold light and ethereal. It is damp snow, crystalline already, and will be gone tomorrow. But just now it is splendid when the sun fires it up. Kjarten threw snowballs at Asgrim and, after being hit on the back of the neck, Asgrim retaliated, swingeingly, with one that burst all over Kjarten. After that, there was no stopping them for ten minutes or more. I can see the places all along the wall where they have scooped up the snow in great hasty handfuls. It does not make up for not seeing them now and not having spoken to them then. It looks too forlorn out there. Both of them looked dubiously at Wolfram kicking about behind me and said nothing either. They waved, but did not like to seem too cordial. Damn Wolfram. If

•

Oh dear. I mustn't let Wolfram see this. I have been writing Rational Prose to show him, if, as I suspect he will, he needs an excuse for his repeated presence here. He came this afternoon as well, and it is clear that Kjarten was the reason.

•

And this morning too. Poor Wolfram. But let's get it down. Wolfram is one of those people born without attractions of any kind. He is a damp and slinking soul in a damp and slinking body, a pointed nose, pimples, and unhealthy, shabby-looking hair. Though he is perhaps not so badly built, he is marred by a native gracelessness—he walks shambling and his shoulders droop—which must have left him friendless and unadmired from his cradle up. In fact, I would be surprised if anyone but his mother ever loved him—I hope she did, or does. And if you get born this way (and a bastard as well, as I suspect), you enter irrevocably a miserable downward spiral. Nobody loves you: your response is to love nobody and to treat everybody like dirt. But you must have something, if only status, and you are prepared to crawl for that. You crawl, knowing people despise you and expecting to be slapped in the face. And so hideously do you crawl that of course your face is slapped. Whereupon you hate and despise everybody all the more. Wolfram is well on down this way. And he has no real intelligence or strength of mind to see how he is going and to halt his progress. He is unnecessarily arrogant and needlessly humble, and disliked by everyone. He is clever enough to know how people hate him, but who is not? One is tender as a snail about people's opinion of one. Wolfram is tender all over. He may even imagine slights and derision where none exist.

I knew all this without seeing that Wolfram might want the glamour of love at least as much as any other human being. And no girl would

look at him—if he ever dared try, which is doubtful. But boys have a different view of young men. Wolfram had discovered this, I know, or he would not have taken so ill my remark about the Queen of the Fairies. And he is lonely and discontented, left out of the merrymaking and forced to do Edwin's work, when he follows me out into the courtyard and there is Kjarten, in all the glamour of gaiety, shouting excitedly about the snow. I don't know whether Wolfram had seen Kjarten before this, or whether he simply discovered what a good view of him could be had from here, but it is clear that, somehow, Kjarten burst upon him and overwhelmed him. He just cannot stop himself climbing these stairs twice a day and fastening his eyes on Kjarten.

I don't know quite when I realised what was the matter with Wolfram. I was furious when he appeared yesterday afternoon, slyly behind me, just after I had gone out into the dwindling, crystalline snow. I knew he was there by the restrained way Asgrim joined Kjarten at the wall and helped him build a squashy kind of snowman on the parapet. When I turned round, there was Wolfram kicking up wads of snow with his heel, looking sulky and noncommittal, and I meditated all sorts of impossible revenges.

Then there was quite a long dreary interval, during which I walked about, feeling as if Wolfram's presence had made everything commonplace, boring and nerve-racking. They were very subdued over the way too. But Kjarten is not the boy to stay subdued for long, particularly if it is the restraints of imprisonment that subdue him. He threw half the snowman pettishly at Asgrim and knocked the rest off the wall down into the drop. And then he recovered his good humour and they began snowballing again. By that time, in some way, I knew quite why poor Wolfram was staring so avidly at Kjarten's smooth, lucent head as it bobbed about and ducked and dodged. And I did not take it kindly at all. I was jealous as hell.

I said to Wolfram: "Wouldn't you like to snowball too?"

He, watching away, shrugged his shoulders and remarked—not with his usual loftiness: rather wistfully—that it looked like fun. Whereupon, I did something I find it hard to forgive myself for. I scooped up a great stinging double handful of snow, said: "There you are, then," and threw it, hard.

It hit Wolfram all over the face and neck. It was the way he took it that makes me feel so bad. He shook his head and gasped, and then, quite meekly, put his fingers down inside his collar to fetch out the snow that had gone inside. And he said not a word. He just shot a funny furtive look over at the other courtyard to see if Kjarten had noticed his disgrace. Luckily, they were too busy there to attend to Wolfram. I could have kicked

myself. That meekness and silence of Wolfram's brought before me, as nothing else could, Wolfram as a schoolboy, humiliated like this a hundred times a day. When it happens that often, you don't protest. You just wait for them to stop. And my snowball must have taken him right back to those days. I am sure of it.

I said I was sorry, very sorry, and I asked him if I could help get the snow out. I said, untruthfully, that I had meant to miss him, and many more fine, apologetic things beside.

Wolfram said, Yes, please would I get it out. So I felt obliged to try. And I was so ashamed of my meanness, that I tried to propel him back out of sight of the other court, so that Asgrim would not see what I had done, but Wolfram, of course, would not budge. He stood there with his eyes fixed on Kjarten, while I fished and fumbled inside his greasy collar feeling more ashamed every second. It took some time, for you know how warmed snow clings to fabric and melts as you pull it. I know they saw. Wolfram said Thank you, nicely but absent-mindedly, when I had done, and made me feel worse than ever. And after they had gone in, each with a cautious wave our way, Wolfram sighed heavily—as heavily as I did—and slouched inside after me, where he felt obliged to put me through another interrogation for form's sake. His heart was in it even less than usual.

•

Luckily I left off there and made Rational Prose for the rest of the day, though there has been a hurry of happenings I wanted to get down. Wolfram has been up here each time Asgrim and Kjarten were out, and, on the last occasion, Edwin came out with a broom, ostensibly to sweep the snow off the courtyard, but actually to have a look at them too. Wolfram collected himself before Edwin as he does not bother to before me—he thinks I don't count, for some reason—and when they had gone in demanded to see the words I had made. "Made" is like "made up" here. I see I have used it without meaning to at the top of this paragraph. I am getting to talk and write as they do. Anyway, luckily I had three pages on the customs of the country, which he scanned negligently. I suspect he did not attend to a word, as I am sure most of it is inaccurate.

Wolfram is really crazy about Kjarten. He twitches when he sees him, and colours up. Then he bends forward, as if the sight of the laughing patrician child over there hurts him physically. He is pale and looks as if he is not sleeping. When he looks at Asgrim, which he does sooner or later, it is with patent envy. He can't bear the affection between them. It excludes him so. And I can hardly bear the sight of Wolfram so nakedly yearning, exposing his feelings like this. It's shaming. But Wolfram doesn't care. I would think he could hardly help himself if he was not so much

more careful in front of Edwin. Of course, Edwin is a wicked old gossip, but I suspect there is more to it than that. I have an idea that homosexuality is regarded with abhorrence in this country. It may even be a crime here. And if that is so, I can understand Wolfram's caution. I do pity him. Terribly. He is eaten and aching with passion. And to feel criminal on top of that is too much. I suppose there is enough of a parallel between us for me to know how he feels.

It snowed heavily when I was positive it would thaw, and the snow comes down my chimney and makes the fire fizz. The odd thing about being in a foreign country is that you misinterpret the weather signs. I could have sworn it was only transient, this snow. Yet here is everything crusted a foot thick, and a drift at the end of my yard like a frozen sea-breaker. My feet get soaked when I go out, and I have to hold Hilda's dress right up at my knees. Never has the cloak been more welcome. Edwin says it nearly always snows like this around Yule. We in the North, he thinks, have it most of the year round. I said we did not—I hope accurately. Edwin is very grumpy. He hates snow, and Elsie was ungrateful again in some way I have not gathered. He takes it out on Hobby, whom he curses continuously. This morning, greatly daring, I told him to stop. I said Hobby had not caused the weather and it was not fair to rail at him. Edwin retorted there were plenty of reasons to rail at Hobby, snow or no snow, and threw a log at Hobby's head, which missed and brought a great fall of soot down the chimney that poor Hobby had to clear up. I shall keep my mouth shut in future. Hobby brought me another poem today—or the second verse of the same one—and I am far too grateful to want to add to his troubles. I gave him the last of my apples to make it up to him.

Kjarten has obviously made it easier for Asgrim to get hold of paper. What I have is half of a drawing which has been crumpled up and thrown in the fire. Asgrim must have filched it from the flames and hidden it. It is all singed, not only round the edges, but along several of the creases. But it must count as used, not missing. I am thankful, though I have an image of Kjarten confined and bored, scribbling sheaves of such drawings and throwing them wholesale among the burning logs, and Asgrim secretly in agony at not being able to collect them all. Or could it be they did it in collusion? It would make life more interesting to Kjarten if they did, and they are plainly much in one another's confidence.

Anyway, this is a wobbly and grotesque figure of a man on a horse—except that the man looks as if he were sitting below the horse's backbone. Kjarten plainly saw its deficiencies as well as I did, for he wrote across it, very heavily and crossly, so that his pen splayed: "Truly Badd." And then threw it away, I suppose. The horse has eight legs. That I thought a deficiency too for a while, until I recollected that Woden's horse (which

had a name that I forget) had eight legs. I think this is meant to be Woden. I wonder who it was in the other half of the picture. It is odd to think these people are heathens. Asgrim and Kjarten must be Woden's men. It is only fitting. Woden, I remember, was god of poets and the valiant in war, and also the most guileful of them all. He suits what I know of Asgrim.

This is what was written on Woden's singed back:

> This truth is mine in closer things
> And walks in sight across the way,
> Watching the dun leaf stray,
> Only for my eyes smiling.
> It moves in long hair trailing
> And locked in words it sings.
> This strange truth is everything
> That walks at hand, and every day
> Quickens with the face it brings.

Not, I think, as good as the first, if I could judge rationally, which I hardly can—I am too taken by the particulars. He must have seen me watch him catch that leaf, but how he could have seen I can't think. Some people do have a very wide angle of vision and see more from the corners of their eyes than most. I think Asgrim does. But this all goes to show how I prefer truth manifest in particulars. Abstractions are hard for me to deal with. Asgrim, perhaps, is the other way on and finds abstractions more congenial. Many men do. But it looks as if he has come to value particulars too, which is very pleasing. In an odd way, I feel as if I had taught him to, though he had it all to do himself.

This was in reply to a note of mine about Kjarten. I forgot to say. I was too preoccupied with what answer to make, and with keeping up the writing for Wolfram. I finished the wine last night, between the two things, and was good for little else. But it helped me write some kind of avowal, which I think I owed Asgrim. I said: "The hamper was too good of you—a feast for the gods. But it is more than your goodness that binds me to you." I hope that will do. I have a dread of being *forward,* and I know simply nothing of how a woman is supposed to behave to an admirer here. And I know I have an awful tendency to sound sentimental.

Anyway, this morning, rather amusingly, Asgrim and Kjarten found a way of communicating in spite of Wolfram—who was here, feverish and pitiful, worse than ever, prowling about where he could see Kjarten as usual. Not long after they came out, when Kjarten had done some racing about, some sliding, and a little slinging of snow so that it narrowly missed the guards—I feel I would like to know more of Kjarten's rela-

tionship with those guards. I think he manages to make their lives a misery without ever quite overstepping the bounds his father has laid down. Of course boys are good at this, but I suspect that prison has perfected his technique. You learn a tightrope kind of brinkmanship in these circumstances—witness myself and my writing. Anyway, as I was saying, after Kjarten had done all this, he came back to Asgrim and they both stood facing me. Then they began to sing, stamping their feet to the rhythm, what I think was a wassail-song. I could not catch most of the words, though they sang them very lustily, because they were both singing, not quite in unison, and the snow deadened the noise. But it sounded splendid. And it was a good idea.

As soon as they had stopped, I clapped, and Wolfram, coming up with his tongue out round his lips, said urgently: "Make him sing again."

So I shouted: "Lovely! Please sing some more."

They were delighted. After some argument and consultation, they sang again, several more songs, all jolly, and one so silly that Kjárten could hardly get the words out. Wolfram was enchanted. He tapped his foot and smiled yearningly, and I daresay I did too. I wished we could sing in reply, but I'm sure Wolfram has a voice like a crow, even if we knew the same songs.

It was not Wolfram but the guards who stopped these goings on. One of them came up to Asgrim and said something, at which Asgrim shrugged and Kjarten looked plain mulish. But Asgrim took Kjarten by the elbow and led him aside, and, after a little sober talking, Kjarten shrugged too. The concert was over, it seemed, and they were to go in. Wolfram let out a little moan of dismay, followed by some obscene words for the guards, but what could we do over here? I rather hoped Wolfram might try hectoring them again, but he made no attempt to. Possibly there has been some complaint about last time, and he has been told exactly how far his authority goes, for he turned away looking so miserable that my heart really bled for him—far more than for myself. After all, Asgrim is here indefinitely, at least until the mopping up of the opposition is over (God! I hope it's going slowly. I must ask Edwin). But Kjarten was only here for Yule and his stay must almost be over. There can't be many more occasions on which Wolfram can hope to see him.

•

I have just seen the most unfortunate scene. One of the most embarrassing and hurtful ever. Wolfram didn't appear this afternoon, and I could scarcely believe my good luck. Then I went out, hearing Kjarten, and found that Wolfram had somehow managed to insinuate himself over there. I don't know how, but he did it. I suppose he has grown too desperate to be cautious. From the look of things, he had been there some time.

He came out into the yard with them, and it was clear at once that Asgrim and Kjarten had both already had more than enough of him. Asgrim was behaving politely enough, but you can tell when someone is irritated: it was in the set of his head, the careful way he moved, the sudden sharp gesture he could not quite suppress, and the way he kept almost but not quite turning his back on Wolfram. Kjarten was trying to ignore him, which was not easy, because Wolfram stuck as close to him as a dog at heel. Kjarten kept giving Asgrim a helpless, meaning look that said "Send him away!" even from where I was. And, of course, Asgrim was quite unable to send Wolfram away. As I said, the worst thing about being a prisoner is that you have to put up with everyone who foists himself on you. I could see Asgrim getting more and more irritated and doing his best not to show it. Never have I watched two people show more clearly that they did not want a third. And Wolfram did not budge. He just hung about beside Kjarten.

Maybe those two were rude, but it is hard to blame them. It turns out—though I did not know it then—that this was Kjarten's last day here. And Wolfram is a wet blanket at the best of times. I have to confess to the most awfully mixed feelings, seeing Wolfram actually over there. I can sympathise as long as he seems to have no hope of getting his hands on Kjarten, but, my God, I saw him there with moral outrage! I was still sorry for him, but I could have punched his nose. It was not his physical intentions that troubled me: it is just that Wolfram is such an unpleasant person. I can understand how he got that way, but it does not alter the fact that he is fixed as being a cold-blooded snob, a greedy social climber, and one of those people who casts on life a sort of moral greyness and boredom of the spirit. Seeing him over there, I felt like I did one time when I was calling on my godmother, and her lunatic old aunt saw me from her window and looked at me like a lizard that had just swallowed a fly. I knew that I had—for a minute at least—been incorporated into her deranged world, and the thought sickened me. I did not want Kjarten incorporated into Wolfram's sickening world.

I know Asgrim felt the same. His irritation increased noticeably every time Wolfram fawned on Kjarten—and Wolfram fawned more and more fervently: I could hardly bear to watch him. From this distance you lost the real emotion in the exaggeration of Wolfram's oily cringing. It just looked dreadful. I thought: "Oh, how *can* he? How can anyone?" And Kjarten kept giving out a great false smile that snapped back into a scowl whenever Wolfram took his eyes off him, and then looking nervously at Asgrim for support. And it went on like this until Asgrim lost his temper. Wolfram obviously said something particularly fulsome to or about Kjarten, and Asgrim, unable to answer civilly, simply turned away with-

out saying anything and looked over at me for a second. An expressive look. It said: "Christ, I can't stand much more of this creep!" And while his back was turned Wolfram took hold of both Kjarten's hands and looked at him adoringly, sentimentally, yearningly—"Walk on me, kick me, I am yours"—and was still doing it when Asgrim turned back. At the sight, Asgrim lost his self-control and cracked out one short insult. One can guess what it was. I couldn't hear the words, but I heard the sort of crunch of fury to his voice. Wolfram practically threw Kjarten's hands from his and drew himself up a little, pretending to be astonished. It did not look very convincing, but I suppose it was his only defence. You could see he was saying: "*What* did you say? Did I hear you aright?" And Asgrim, instead of retracting it, stood there and said it again, possibly with embellishments.

I am afraid that was foolish of him. Wolfram at once put on a flaming great act of outraged innocence and hysterical righteousness. He raved and he gestured, and he flung about the yard apostrophising the guards, calling on them to bear witness to what Asgrim had said—the wicked, wicked slander, when Wolfram himself had done nothing, but nothing, to deserve it. And the guards conceded that Asgrim had said it, humouringly and a little insolently: it was clear they quite agreed with Asgrim but dared not say so. And Wolfram ranted on again. I could hear his voice yapping and neighing, and I could not pick out one word in seven. Asgrim stood there looking totally unrepentant. I remember I could not see Kjarten. He had retreated where the wall hid him. Then Wolfram screamed at the guards to get that man out of his sight, take him away, lock him up, or he would complain that they had failed in their duty. And some more on the same lines.

Now it is clear that Wolfram has a certain amount of pull somewhere. As soon as he talked of complaining, they looked worried and said things to one another and nodded. Then all three of them came up to Asgrim. I thought for a moment that Asgrim was going to refuse to go. He and the guards stood looking at one another until the tension was almost unbearable. Then, thank God, he gave in and walked inside without them having to lay a finger on him. I could see by his face as he went that he was furious—probably as much with himself as with Wolfram.

Wolfram, panting rather after his histrionics, turned to Kjarten, who reappeared where I could see him and actually looked over at me as if he were wondering whether to draw me into the scene or not. He decided not. It was the coolest decision: he could manage on his own. Once his father had gone, Kjarten was so different that he took my breath away. Indeed, this was what kept me there, anxious and fascinated. I know most kids tend to have something of a facade before their parents, but this boy

might have been two separate people. He dropped the playful, boyish boy completely. Tête-à-tête with Wolfram, this was a competent youngster, quite aware of his value, quite at home in the situation, and not disposed to sell himself cheap—though not above letting Wolfram see what a prize he was missing. I could have smacked him for that. I find it hard to describe the subtle flirtatiousness Kjarten infused into his businesslike stance. He stood there with his arms folded, giving poor Wolfram the come-hither and the go-hence so seamlessly and expertly blended that I doubt if Wolfram knew what to make of him from one moment to the next. Myself wheedling candy from Edwin is crude mummery beside Kjarten's performance. Kjarten's was professional expertise. Plainly he had been there before.

Wolfram gained quite a little in dignity once they were alone. He fawned less and was earnest. The lord knows what he said, but it was clear he made his proposal in form. Kjarten listened, smiled slightly, looked away, listened again, and said very little. After a while, it almost seemed he was willing. Wolfram thought he was. He smiled and gained steadily in confidence until, at length, almost happily, and very tenderly, he laid his hand on Kjarten's arm. Having brought him to this point, Kjarten shook the hand off without hesitation. Then he stuck his head up missishly and laughed in Wolfram's face. It was total derision. He made it quite clear that he had led Wolfram on in order simply to reject him. Words went with his derision—I expect: "Who, you? Not bloody likely. I've bigger fish to fry." And having said them, Kjarten strolled away, still laughing, out of my sight and indoors. The door banged—whether for Wolfram's benefit or Asgrim's I can't say—and that was that. Lord, that kid was cruel! He left Wolfram literally writhing, doubled up, moving and twisting about with the shame of it, in a way I hope never to see again. It was so awful, and so private, that I got myself quickly out of sight. I was sure he would not want to think anyone saw him like that.

I felt quite sick, and I was shaking all over. Cruelty is sickening. I suppose I should have been relieved that Kjarten knew enough to avoid contact with Wolfram's dreary soul, but I am afraid Wolfram is the one I am sorry for. Little swine. For two pins I'd tell his father—except I know it would hurt Asgrim acutely and read like pure malice on my part. I wonder if Kjarten gained his expertise in prison or before. There's no knowing of course. But I fear it was prison, somehow. I can see him growing up as unpleasant as Hrinkle and worse than Wolfram unless he can take himself in hand—and what boy can take himself in hand in prison? And the curious thing is that I am sure both the parts of Kjarten that I have seen are quite genuine: he is as truly a boyish boy as he is a practised catamite.

I went out again after ten minutes or so to see what Wolfram was doing. Honestly, I would not have been surprised to see him at the bottom of the drop—since, of course, in order to leave the yard he would have to go in through their prison and brave Kjarten's derision again (which would be derision none the less for being mute and concealed). But Wolfram was gone. He must have braved it. I suppose he would still rather be alive and climb the social ladder. If he gets high enough, after all, he can beckon Kjartens to him by the dozen. Perhaps I'm wasting my sympathy on Wolfram. But I think not. He had the most sincere passion for that boy and has just had it flung in his face.

And then, while I was starting to write this down, Edwin came in with a note—and a number of words about the trouble I caused him. All those stairs. His favourite diatribe, with his feet "rarely so bad" and so on. Then he stayed to see what the note was about, the nosy old hypocrite. I nearly didn't tell him, because it does make some difference, at least to Asgrim's behaviour, to know that it was Kjarten's last day.

The note was from Kjarten himself—nothing from Asgrim: I suppose there was no defensible excuse for it—and it says:

> "Lady, I give you greetings and say you farewell. I shall not wave to you again as I leave tomorrow morning early. I meant to call across to you but had no chance, what with things. It was good to see you every day.
>
> Your friend,
> Kjarten."

And that seems to me really quite a nice letter. I wonder if he wrote it off his own bat or whether Asgrim suggested it. That "what with things" rather suggests he thought of it himself. It asks for complicity in me. Maybe he was trying to placate me, get me not to think too ill of him for what he knew I saw. Maybe he was afraid I'd tell his father. Probably I shall never know. And when I look at it, it does its job and I cannot think too badly of the kid. Artful little devil.

"Oh," says Edwin, "leaving, is he? His week's up, then, and they'll take him back to Markwater." And he began telling me what Markwater was like, until he remembered I was supposed to have caused him trouble and went stamping busily off on some imaginary errand.

•

We are back to our old routine today. No Kjarten shouting, no Wolfram, and only one sight of Asgrim, muffled up against the latest snow and sombrely pacing about. It is so quiet and so intensely lonely that I feel as if I had a flat kind of echo in my head—like the noise the soldiers make down there in the snow. It is awful. I had not realised how much variety Kjarten brought here with him. I have almost finished everything

in the hamper now. Only some staleish gingerbread remains, and I do not like gingerbread much. And, by the looks of it, they are not letting Asgrim out for a second airing now that he is alone again. The afternoon outing must have been a concession to Kjarten's energy. It is now past the usual time—as far as I can tell—and no one has come out. Oh dreary, dreary. What a long time till tomorrow morning.

Edwin has been up, on one of his "cheering up" sessions. He found me disconsolately taking down my greenery, which is hard and dry and a little dusty, and he seemed to think I did right. The festive season is officially over. Most of it I burnt, in a bright raucous flaring that made Edwin's boots steam and stink, but I kept the freshest sprig of holly, some ivy, and Kjarten's little spray of leaves. These smell better than ever now—something like bay. They look like miniature laurel. I asked Edwin about them.

"Oh-ho!" says he. "Alvery. Who'd be giving you alvery, now?" I told him it was from Kjarten. Edwin exclaimed that it was bare-faced daring, and seemed amazed that I did not know why. "You *must* know," he said. "You carried their letters and all. Did you never mark it? Never? They took it as their token, alvery meaning freedom, as is well known, and there isn't a thrall that doesn't carry a sprig yet somewhere about him."

Alvery, it seems, is the badge of Hathriver, but of more significance than the red or the white rose, which, in spite of being Yorkshire born, I always forget which went with which party—perhaps it is more like the Irish green. Anyway, you wear it to show yourself a radical. Edwin discoursed of it repetitively for a long time, and, in the course of it, I discovered why Asgrim and Kjarten were so amused by my other greenstuff. Holly is for Lowland, and ivy for Mark. Edwin declares—though I do not believe him for one moment—that he never goes outside the stronghold but with ivy wreathed round his hat. He never goes out of the stronghold anyway. So I see to some extent why the alvery was sent. I have put it carefully in my bedroom, near where I have hidden the scrappet from Asgrim saying he was "rarely so happy." This is the only note I have dared keep.

And my hard feelings against Kjarten are dissipated so far that I have spent most of today thinking of him, wondering if he made the journey to Markwater locked in such a mercilessly jolting conveyance as brought me here. I hope they allowed him some freer form of travel.

•

This day I sent Asgrim another note, to say I missed Kjarten too, acutely. I can see Asgrim is really lonely. He has not the heart to shout things, though he called "Good morning." But that was all. For the rest of the time he paced, like animals do in the zoo, firmly and aimlessly, with a heavy swing round to go the other way when he came to the wall.

He looked desolately caged, older, and rather worn out. I hope he will recover—not to shout to me, but simply not to eat his heart out like this. I am too sad for this. I shall spend the rest of the day writing limericks.

•

No reply today. Asgrim still slow and sad, but waved to me and seemed to try to be cheerful.

•

Nor today. So I have been sucking in hints from Edwin's talk and thinking of alvery and Hobby. Fortunately, I have grown used to concealing my interest in anything from Edwin, because I should certainly otherwise have caused Hobby some trouble by trying to find out more about him. He has intrigued me ever since he brought the first note. And he knew about alvery. He was quite scornful when Wolfram did not—or pretended not to, I think. That might have been a bad slip on Hobby's part, if he had shown his scorn in front of someone less self-engrossed than Wolfram. But again he seemed to know just how far he could go there. As I think I said, Hobby is an old campaigner. He cannot, he just cannot, be as daft as he seems. He must, clearly, be a Hathriver man, but whether simple messenger, spy, or fifth columnist I have no way of finding out. Hobby is about as impenetrable as a youth could be. From what Edwin deigns to say of him, I take it Hobby is a native of Mark and—though this is pure conjecture—possibly a thrall by birth. I think his being a thrall would explain Edwin's way of treating him, and Wolfram's. Don't they have a sign to show they are thralls? Or does everybody just know? If I am right, then Hobby supports Hathriver naturally, for what I suppose you might call political reasons. Freedom is in it. And this troubles me. For I fear poor Hobby must think he is carrying me messages of state, full of important secrets bearing on his own poor future, whereas, in actual fact— Oh, I am a *fraud*. And I have really drifted. It is too late to explain now. Edwin takes it as a well known fact, these days, that I was at least a messenger of some standing, if not a Female Spy. This could just be Edwin's way of adding to his own importance, except that I think Wolfram thinks so too.

Wolfram, Edwin tells me, has taken to his bed. I am not surprised. He must be shattered. Edwin thinks, though, that Wolfram is simply sulking. Edwin never allows anyone to be ill except himself—he is always supposed to be on the brink of collapsing from overwork. No. That is not quite fair. He was very kind to me, in his way, when I was ill. And his "cheering up" is supposed to be a continuation of the same kindness, though it gives him a solid hour a day of ardent gossip. And he gossips to me today that Wolfram is furious because he can't get satisfaction from Hrinkle (or Hrinkle's representative: this is not quite clear from the way

Edwin puts it) over the way Asgrim insulted him. I gather Wolfram and the guards both had their say to whoever it was, and the guards, while not exactly defending Asgrim, contrived to suggest that it was their business and not Wolfram's. Wolfram, it seems, lost his cause, partly through his own hysterical exaggerations, and partly because Asgrim, it appears, is well known to have a really savage temper. I must say, from what I have seen I wouldn't have guessed it. But Edwin assures me he has. There have been occasions, almost legendary, when Asgrim has fallen into rages so terrible that strong men flew like chaff before him. So Edwin. I would be tempted to put this down to *saeva indignatio*—but then I don't know the facts. If he *has* this appalling temper, then I can only say he must have been exercising extraordinary restraint over the way there.

•

An answer today, thank the gods. The god on this one appears to be Thor. At least, he is very large and carries a hammer. Possibly he is attacking the World Serpent, but his adversary is in the half of the picture I have not got. Like Woden, he is angrily crossed out and a little charred. Asgrim has room to spread himself a little on the other side. "Thank you," he says. "I am lonely now. But there is room for thought again. See this. Truth is made up of many small things, some good, some evil, and some merely in being. Would you say in your knowledge that the small things have more worth than the great thoughts we build out of them?"

Well, I have been all day thinking this over. I am divided between concern and pleasure. The pleasure not only that he wrote, but that he thought me worth consulting—and that I divined the way he was thinking from his verses. But concern. For one thing, it's a strange thing to write to a lady you say you love. For another, I keep fearing that Kjarten's short visit has unbalanced Asgrim and that he is now turning a treadmill of unreal ratiocination. Philosophy is fine, but I have a sneaking feeling it exists in a void. If he is in such a treadmill, I can't see that it is working anything except pointless further machinery. Dare I say this? Not, I think. Asgrim may be a person whose decisions really have to rest on some kind of philosophical groundwork. Though I fail to see what decision he can possibly arrive at from any conclusion of mine about truth, I shall try to come to one. Maybe at least I can stop the treadmill.

Perhaps if I write my thoughts down I will arrive somewhere. Asgrim, I can see, sets great store by what I have called abstractions—his "great thoughts"—anyway, by the general ideas you have about life and which, once you have formed them, shape your future acts by a kind of driving splendour. They are your beliefs and make you tick. I think "splendour" is an important word. For, to be worthwhile, and to feel yourself worthwhile, you must have a sense of splendour—of ultimate, forceful good-

ness—which serves you both as yardstick and mainspring. Asgrim, clearly, has had this sense. The adoption of alvery bears witness to it. And, possibly, being wealthy, gifted and powerful, he came by the notion of splendour rather easily and it seemed large and perspicuous to him. He acted by it. Even Edwin allows this. Then he was imprisoned. Almost everything he valued was removed or destroyed, and the ideas he had started were persecuted (Edwin tells me that any thrall found with alvery is to be executed, on Hrinkle's orders). He was forced to the small dreary round of prison life, where a detail like dirty drinking-water—as mine is today—assumes worldwide proportions: trivia are all you have. And yet , in order to sustain your identity and your sanity, you are forced to find your sense of splendour even in these trivia. I found it when I saw Asgrim catch his leaf. Asgrim found it seeing me, I think, where some men might have called upon religion. But Asgrim is a heathen, so he calls his "great thoughts" truth—and not, perhaps, now I think of it, so irreligiously, for Woden, in a strange inhuman way, is an eternal seeker after truth of a kind. There is a trouble in this kind of truth, however. You are a subtle, civilised person, though in prison. The disparity between your "great thoughts" and your daily trudging life strikes you with the flat, swingeing force of irony. They are miles apart; but, since they are both part of you, you must struggle to reconcile, if not to unite them; and you want a reason for it—not the simple, flat reason that both things are in your consciousness. What do you do? I think what Asgrim has asked me is what he shall do about this terrible disparity.

This is what I shall write, then—though it is a struggle to find words for it that are in his dialect as well as mine. "Both have equal worth, I think. One cannot have great thoughts without the small things to shape them from; but, on their own, most small things are meaningless. They need to be fired up. Without greater thoughts, we would live only from moment to moment, not even truly in space and time, which is perhaps how animals live. Does this help your trouble?"

That took the whole of one side of one of my strips of paper, and half of the reverse. It was hard to fold without showing the writing. But it is done, and Hobby took it this morning. Asgrim, not yet having it, was pacing pensively, churning ratiocination in every line of him. I am afraid he will have bulged out into some new area of trouble before he gets my answer. But he smiled over at me as if he were trying to bring himself to order—a braced and businesslike smile, which went away quickly and left him looking weary.

You know, I think it was cruel of them to bring him Kjarten. Before Yule, Asgrim had found some sort of equilibrium. Now I can see it has gone. He is drearily fretting, pointlessly exacerbated and, I suspect, on

rather worse terms with his guards than he was. Not that they were ever comradely. But there was a kind of acceptance on both sides. Asgrim seemed to accept that they watched his every move: they, that Asgrim was their job of work. Now I can see them exchanging snappish remarks, that seem personal, with a real edge of malice to them. The swart, hefty one, in particular, seems to have his knife into Asgrim properly. And Asgrim does not spare him, either. There was a moment, just now, before they came in, when my heart was really in my mouth.

I have no idea what it was about, but the swart one began it—said something, obviously insolent, and looked at the sky with his tongue bulging his cheek, inviting annoyance. And Asgrim, who three weeks ago would have let it ride, showed his annoyance and snapped at him. Whereupon the swart one, having got his opening, lowers his jowl, glowers, and takes a couple of rolling, contumacious steps in Asgrim's direction. And Asgrim, in his turn, does the unwisely provocative thing and turns his back and stalks away from him. At which, swart one started after him with his fists clumped, growling, and was only stopped by the other guard catching his elbow and placating him—and not with any words complimentary to Asgrim by the look of things. He looked nastily at Asgrim saying them, and Asgrim snarled something back over his shoulder plainly quite as uncomplimentary. There followed an uneasy stasis, with all three looking most unloving, broken by the second guard bowing deeply and derisively and, with a wave of his hand, inviting Asgrim to step indoors again. Asgrim took his time about it. He delayed until the swart one was within an ace of taking him and pushing him in, and then he slipped in front of him, nodding gaily at me—almost in Kjarten's manner of ferocious vivacity—and sailed inside as if he did it of his own free will. They followed glaring.

I don't like it. They are all getting on one another's nerves almost unendurably—and it must lead you to hate one another, seven of you all cooped up together, and one at least of you resenting every minute of it. I hope Asgrim finds his equilibrium again. And I hope the guards recover too, before he has insulted them irremediably. The trouble must be confinement, and the weather: it snows perpetually, sleetily and depressingly, and if the guards have any time off duty they must have to spend it staring at the icy yards. It isn't weather to go out in. I had to spend half an hour warming my hands before I could write this.

•

There is one blessing to the weather, though—it's an ill wind. Edwin has just left after giving me a garrulous account of how slowly the mopping up is going. The roads to the Lowlands are all flooded and impassable, it seems, and Regan is sitting at the edge of the floods with a miser-

able army, waiting for winter to be over so that he can get at Hilda's party. Hilda's crew—which I now gather is really led by her brother Hugh—are snug in the town of Holland and sniping at Regan by boat from time to time. The mother of Hilda and Hugh, a woman of granite, has her own army and is on the march in spite of the weather, towards a place which was at one time a distant associate of Hathriver, but what her intention is Edwin doesn't know. He is chiefly taken up with the grim stamina of this warlike old lady. So am I. It is little short of incredible. She is fully sixty, it seems, and as bloodthirsty as Hrinkle.

Hrinkle is very bloodthirsty. He has a line in calculated cruelty which puts me in mind of Caesar docking the right hands of that tribe of offending Gauls, or William the Conqueror placidly burning the English crops to starve his conquest into submission. Hrinkle burnt in Hathriver last autumn, it seems, all the harvested grain and every piece of livestock he could lay hands on. Now, because the weather precludes fighting, he is emulating Caesar and having the ears off any man, free or thrall, found with alvery in his possession. There was a purge in Mark itself over Yule, I gather. Edwin was brutally jolly about it and seemed to think it very good statesmanship. I think it is sickening. I had to ask him to talk of something else (I have just been hiding my sprig somewhere safer). So Edwin goes onto a piece of mass murder in a place called Widburn, where support for Asgrim is very strong—or was, until Hrinkle took a member of each family (arbitrarily, men, women, or children) and cut the throat of each as a warning to the rest. We now hear nothing from Widburn, it seems.

While Edwin was telling me this, I was screaming inside that people surely wouldn't stand for it. They must rise and stop it. But now I see this is unlikely. Hrinkle has taken the most efficient steps to security. People may suffer furious sorrow, but without leaders they will not rise up. Be persistently cruel enough, and the populace, with shaken diligence, knuckles under. Most ordinary men are too committed to their work and their family to do otherwise. You need ideas—splendours—to fire you to uprising. Once the ideas are afoot, then the smallest transgression of justice on the ruler's part is seized on as if it were the direst cruelty. Without ideas, you cringe and accept major cruelty, let alone small transgressions. And it seems to me that the ideas have not had long enough to brew in. Asgrim has been at work only on half a generation, which is not enough to leaven the mass. The ideas are being tramped out and apathy is spreading over the country. Hrinkle knows his job. And since his job is merely the wielding of practical power, it cannot matter to him that he has tramped away vitality along with hope and opposition.

Vitality in a country is a strange matter. You have it, in a matter-of-fact way, in the Lowlands. They are getting on with the business of op-

posing these tyrants. From Edwin's remarks I get a clear sense of the quality of these Lowlanders. They are a dour, tough and unforthcoming people and stick to their cause like bulldogs. I can see Hilda's fat maid was a typical Lowlander, unfriendly, parochial, and faithful in her limited way. They will do. I suspect they will retain these qualities even when they are conquered. The hope and vitality in them is self-centred and does not lead to despair and apathy.

But I get no such feeling about places north and west of here, adherents of Hathriver. Edwin gives me quite heartrending glimpses of privation and apathy. What these people once were is now only conjectural; but I get fleeting notions of mercurial ebullience. They sang in Hathriver. Widburn was festive. Gardale was the most beautiful of the valleys. None of this is very resonant as I write it down, but, as it drops from Edwin, it rings of people more gifted and joyous than those in the Lowlands, more outgoing, more open to ideas and much less stable. I think these people, being less obstinately self-satisfied than the Lowlands, are that much more vulnerable to Hrinkle's treatment. Take away hope, and they have no kind of vitality. From Edwin's sketchy account, I fear that if Asgrim were to be released tomorrow he would find himself helpless amidst his countrymen's dejection. I hope not. They have had a mere nine months of oppression, but that may be sufficient. By Edwin's account, there is plague there, as well as starvation, and I fear the worst. I see I must pin my hopes for long resistance and Asgrim's life on the unlovable dour Lowlands alone.

•

I have just been out to examine the weather. I have suddenly realised that the later it thaws, the longer the mopping up will take. It may be the middle of January now, which ought to mean another month of foul weather at least. But there are signs of amelioration. It is wet cold now, snowing slush almost. Oh God, in that case make it rain incessantly. Turn the Lowlands into an island and cut Mark off from Hathriver too, if that is possible.

•

My prayers answered today. It is pouring. Hobby was soaked when he came in this morning, and he did not bring a message, or not a written one. When he saw me look, when Edwin was out unlocking the doors, he said: "The answer's Thank you. He's a bit beset this now." Then he shut his mouth and sneezed through his nose over the kindling. I said he had caught a cold, surely; and he replied he was used to it. But he sniffled so and looked so mauve and wretched that I told Edwin he'd find himself without Hobby if he didn't make sure he was dried and warmed. Edwin retorted that there were plenty more where Hobby came from, which cheered neither me nor Hobby. But I think Edwin did in fact take pity

on Hobby, from something he said just now about "mollycoddling." I take it he may at least have let the poor kid sit by a fire somewhere.

Talking of fires, I can see the wet black smoke from the fire in Asgrim's quarters gusting and spreading under the downpour. The water must come down his chimney as badly as it comes down mine. I have to build the fire over in one corner of the grate to avoid its being put out completely.

Asgrim did not come out today. I hope it was merely the rain. It was like standing under a waterfall, and cold as the grave out there. But I don't like what Hobby said about him being "a bit beset." It sounded as if the disagreements with the guards might have come to a head. If they have, I suspect Asgrim will come off worst—I feel so nervous I can't bear to write more. I'll do Rational Prose for Wolfram instead.

•

Speak of the devil. Wolfram has been here all afternoon. I shall have to write it tomorrow. Edwin is just coming to light the lamp. .

•

No Hobby this morning. No message. And still pouring. Edwin tells me Hobby is sick, coughing blue murder and feverish. Poor Hobby. I wish I had something good to send him. But it seems that "over there" was allowed to send him some wine. Asgrim *is* good—the more so as it seems he was very beset indeed these last two days, and indirectly the cause of Wolfram's tedious visit to me.

Hrinkle was here, it seems, going through the affairs of the stronghold with martinet savagery. Two of the soldiers below have been flogged. Wolfram has been hauled over the coals on several counts, and Edwin has been told to bring me less fuel in future—a command that, today at least, he has blandly ignored, remarking, with one of his ponderous leering winks, that I was unlikely to mention the matter, was I? But the bulk of the time Hrinkle spent with Asgrim, without—I think—any particular violence, going into his affairs exhaustively. The guards stated their grievances, it seems. One of them has been replaced. But most of the time, according to Edwin, Hrinkle was checking security, making sure that no messages could get to Asgrim or leave him. I hope to God he had destroyed my note by then, for I hear the place was searched and so was Asgrim himself. For it could have been that Wolfram's visit related to my attempts at philosophy.

But I think not. Wolfram started simply with an enlarged version of the usual interrogation, and then went on—to my considerable alarm—to ask in a lacklustre way, as if he did not really believe in the possibility, how many messages I had sent since I had been a prisoner. I took courage from his lack of conviction and said "None." And I stuck to the lie while

Wolfram ranged half-heartedly about, suggesting that I threw things out of the window, down the drop, or into the hands of one of the soldiers. It was easy enough to deny that, but I was in a considerable fluster all the same and he may have detected it. I think Wolfram was whipped up here by Hrinkle, who wanted every avenue explored. It does not seem exactly as if anyone thinks that Asgrim has sent me messages, or I to him, but they are making sure all the same. And the reports from me are still unsatisfactory, so Hrinkle told Wolfram to go and have a go at me again. Or that is how I read it, anyway.

Wolfram was rain-spattered, sulkier than usual, and he had a cold too. He is still haggard from his passions over Yule. It was clear to me that he did not want to be here (from which I took courage) and that he regarded the questions he asked as nothing but a bore. He sat in my best chair—the one I packed solid with slips of paper—hogging the fire and annoying me very much. I had spread the cloak there to dry, and I had to move it for Wolfram's benefit, with the result that it is still wet today. When he had done with the questions, Wolfram sighed and asked to see what I had been writing. I gave him my latest Rational Prose, which he smothered a yawn over but set out to read with considerably more concentration than usual. (Reminder to myself: Emily, you must write *more,* or he will want to see *this.*) It was an expanded form of my disquisition on tyranny and people's vitality.

Wolfram said: "Who's Keyser?"

I told him who Julius Caesar was, and was going on to Augustus and the rest—for I have long ago discovered that I can get rid of Wolfram by boring him, and he bores easily—when he flapped his knob-knuckled hand at me to be quiet and went back to reading Prose. I had never expected it to receive so much attention, and I was alarmed. Apart from anything else, the gaps in my knowledge are yawning and I had made no secret of them. I had a sudden galvanic horror that I was about to be discovered as an irrelevant foreigner and be turned out free forthwith to starve in the freezing and flooded countryside. As Wolfram read, my face heated and I kept finding that I was shifting anxiously about. What I should do if they turned me out, I just do not know.

At last he lifted his head, stared at the fire and said, in the queer humble, puzzled way he has, that gets him my sympathy even when I least want to give it: "Why is this all wrong? Is all you know by hearsay?"

He had hit on the heart of the matter, to my terror, yet he was simply puzzled by it. That is Wolfram all over. Humility is so inherent in him that he cannot see when his mind has told him something clear and true. This, though it irritates me profoundly, also touches me deeply. Wolfram, in some ways, is far more deprived and stunted even than Hobby.

I told him hastily that the North was so cut off that we knew generally very little of the rest of the country. He accepted it meekly, and I could have wept for him. I said I had got most of my facts from Edwin, and asked him where they were wrong.

"Oh, everywhere," he said, rather helplessly. "The Lowlands are bargaining for peace, you know." My heart sank at that. "And you're wrong about Widburn," he said. "They took to the fells after the killings, and they cause a deal of airt harrying our men as they go by on the road." At which my heart lifted a little. Wolfram meanwhile gazed on sadly at the fire. "And," he said, "Gardale's not a patch on Hathriver, not as a place, nor for the people in it. They're lovely people in Hathriver, proud and handsome." I could see by the fixity of his meditation that he was thinking of Kjarten then. It was clear he was, when he broke out with: "Hrinkle can go to Markwater. Why can't I?"

I said it didn't seem fair.

"It *isn't* fair!" he said. "Hrinkle's not one of your great ones yet, whatever he thinks. I have some rights too." Then, with a frank sort of embarrassment which was, all the same, quite indescribably smug, he said: "Hrinkle's my brother. Did you know?"

So that's it! I thought. Half-brother, you mean, Wolfram. I see now why he has pull. And I *think* I see why he was kept so far from Kjarten—it would make sense if Hrinkle were equally enamoured. I remember I said, among these thoughts, that I hadn't known, and that certainly Wolfram was entitled to consideration—various vague right things, which Wolfram seemed to appreciate, for he sidled back into my chair and gave me the first moderately friendly look I have had from him. After that he stuck on, and on, mooningly looking at the fire, saying very little, but giving vent every so often to a sighing reminiscence of Kjarten.

"Did you see how bright his hair was?" he said.

I said "Yes."

Then, after a while, he said: "But you can't see his eyes from here." He seemed to take it for granted that I was in his confidence—I don't know why, except that it reflects the facts, I suppose. It was nearly dark when he left. And he tells me he is coming again today. It looks as if I exchange Edwin for Wolfram in the afternoons, and I'm not sure I like the change.

•

Hobby is back—much too soon, I should say.

I wonder where Asgrim hid that paper that Hrinkle didn't find it. I have had another note today with two big people fighting on the back of it. Would they be giants, or gods? They are wielding great clubs. Kjarten must have set out to illustrate his whole heathen pantheon. Perhaps it

was a pious exercise of some kind, like Scripture lessons in England. The message on the reverse is in a way not inappropriate, for it says: "Thank you. But what do you say to this? We call on the gods to make our dough rise, but they are gods all the same." Discuss. Write on one side of the paper only. Oh Asgrim. I was right about that treadmill. As far as I can see, he has just put me the same question the other way round.

•

Did I leave this under the Rational Prose, or on top? I wish to heaven I could remember. It was underneath when I came in from the courtyard. Let us hope it was underneath when I went out. Oh it *must* have been. I would surely not be fool enough to leave it where Wolfram could see it—but Wolfram himself is so damn devious that it would be just like him to put it underneath when he had read it so that I should suspect nothing. If *only* I could remember. The fact is, I have got so used to getting messages and writing my thoughts in safety that I'm growing careless. I must take a grip on myself. And I think I had better warn Asgrim.

I didn't write much, you see, because I was too busy thinking of the question Asgrim set me—*posed*, Emily, not *set:* I'm sure he didn't intend to sound like an Examining Board. They don't have them here, as far as I know. Then, as it was time to see him, I went out as usual, into a fine, itching drizzle, against which Asgrim had turned up his hood for once—usually he goes bare-headed. In spite of the drizzle, he did not seem nearly so miserable today. He smiled, and looked as much as to say "You got my message?" And I nodded. Then, I suppose to explain it, he went into a bit of a droll pantomime, hand-spreading, shoulder-humping and so on, which I think was meant to show me the way your mind goes round and round on these questions once you start, and perhaps by way of apology for asking me about them too. He made me laugh, I must confess, and himself too by the end. And all this was in the face of the guards, who were humped up in the background looking my way because of the drizzle, and who appeared quite unconcerned. One of them was the swart one, by the way. I had rather been hoping he was the one Hrinkle replaced, but it looks as if it was one of the other ones, more's the pity. Anyway, neither he, nor the other, made any objection to Asgrim's miming, and for nearly half an hour we were very cordial and carefree with one another—almost in the way we were when Kjarten was here. I suppose Asgrim must be heartily glad that he had come off so well from Hrinkle's visit. He's a brave man, I know, but it must have been a hideous strain and he must be most relieved that nothing incriminating was found. I know what I go through—am going through.

Because Wolfram came slouching out about five minutes before Asgrim went in and told me rudely to come in out of the wet at once. I

protested. I know Wolfram fairly well by now and I have never known him be really firm yet. And he told me to shut up. At least, they say "Shut your mouth" here, which sounds even ruder. No—now I come to think of it, I remember Wolfram said: "Shut *thy* mouth," which alarms me more than ever, even though the way he said it was just plain peevish. But, as far as I can gather, you only *thee* and *thou* a person here to show contempt. Edwin *thous* Hobby all the time, and tended to do it to me too, in the beginning, when he thought I was no lady.

At the time, this was lost on me, because I was watching Asgrim move away circumspectly to the back wall, with the guards turning reluctantly after him into the force of the drizzle, and I simply did not want to leave. I said: "Oh, please, Wolfram!"

"Well, then, stay," he said, very surly.

So I stayed. Not that it did much good. Asgrim looked over once or twice from the far wall to see if Wolfram was still there. And of course he was. I didn't like the way he looked at Asgrim at all. There was a sort of fixity of malice to it, made none the better to see by the way the rain plastered Wolfram's dingy hair down and dripped off the end of his nose. I know, looking at him, I thought: "My God, Wolfram's got it in for Asgrim!" I suppose it was the row over Kjarten that did it. But it was not until I got indoors and Wolfram slunk away downstairs that I began to wonder what was the immediate cause of that look. Oh, I do pray it was not my stupid, stupid negligence.

Of course, it may not be that bad. If Wolfram made no secret of his feelings for Kjarten in front of me, then I was nearly as indiscreet in front of him. It may simply have occurred to him to make use of his knowledge—in which case, I should fear for myself, especially after that *thy*. But, somehow, from that look, I get the feeling that Wolfram is after Asgrim, not me, and that he's not going to rest until he's got something concrete on him. I must warn Asgrim—and hide this writing in future. No. I daren't. Even if I burn it, that is tantamount to admitting it was incriminating. Wolfram—oh, speak of the devil

•

What an afternoon! I had a notion that if Wolfram came in the morning, he would not pay me the promised visit in the afternoon as well. And I—Now here is Edwin coming upstairs. There's no peace in this prison.

•

This morning I have managed to get rid of Edwin by sitting with my p

Wolfram alarms me. I have no idea what he thinks he's up to. When he came in so suddenly, I pulled a sheet of Rational Prose over what I had

just put down and hoped for the best. He didn't ask to see it. That's what makes me feel he knows what is in it. Yes, I know he would much rather *not* see my writing, but it is such a contrast to his manner of the day before yesterday when he insisted on reading whole pages. This time he just threw himself sulkily down in my one-time rickety chair and, after staring at the fire a while, began on Kjarten. Even that was half-hearted, as if he felt he had to say something. But he warmed to his task fairly quickly and treated me to some pretty ripe sentimentalities about the whiteness of Kjarten's neck and the peachy ripeness of his cheeks. He quite sickened me. Real his feelings may be, but his expression of them is not. So, desperate for a change of subject, I thought to myself: "I'll try a little fishing for what's really on your mind, my lad." And, while we were at it, since he had prevented me thinking about Asgrim's question, I thought he might as well help me discuss it. After all, he claims to be educated.

So, via the difference in my Northern beliefs, I led him round to the gods.

"The gods," says Wolfram. "Oh, the gods. I don't bother much with them. They don't bother much with men, thou knows."

I said we thought differently in the North. "Do you mean to say," I remember asking, "that you don't see the gods as holy—you know, something which makes life better, makes all the dull ordinary things worthwhile, I mean? Don't the gods seem splendid to you at all?"

"I suppose they're fine enough," Wolfram conceded. "But they're nothing to do with me." Then he thought for a bit and added: "Woden's men think otherwise, mind—at least, those that worship do. Some call themselves Woden's men so they needn't keep their word. Woden's a great liar, thou knows." And he cackled a bit at the idea.

I am quite ready to believe that many people, particularly Wolfram's kind, are very cynical about these gods of theirs. They can't have much to offer Wolfram. So I tried to get at the matter another way, and asked him rather insistently whether there was not *something* he regarded as holy, or at least something that struck him as grander than the common.

He did not seem to mind my asking. He just shrugged and answered: "No, I think not," to every way I could find of putting the question, and went on staring at the fire.

"You're educated," I said, in exasperation. "What have you been taught to believe in?"

And he shrugged again and said: "The gods," without even apparently seeing his answer as funny. And he did not seem conscious that I was fishing for something, or even surprised that I should ask so. When I laughed at that last answer, he looked at me for a moment, I think to find out whether I was laughing *at* him or not. I was not. It would have been

too mean. People have laughed and jeered at Wolfram most of his life, I am sure. And I am sure too that Wolfram saw I was not laughing at him, because he smiled. That is why I am fairly sure that what he said next had no malice in it at all, which makes it all the odder.

"It may sound funny," he said, "but we're all taught to believe. The thralls pray to the gods. Even some highborn do. But we know the gods are busy with their own things. There's the saying 'We call on the gods shoeing a horse, but they are the gods all the same.' Thou must know that. Don't they say that in the North?"

"No," I said, blank as my next clean sheet, and that paper set up on one edge would have felt more secure than I did. What I felt was beyond horror, into a kind of wasteland of conviction behind. I just thought: "He *has* read my writing," and was quite calm about it. "If the gods don't help," I said, "who does then?" just as if nothing whatsoever of importance had happened.

Wolfram said, exactly in his usual manner, rather drearily: "We help ourselves, I suppose," and went on looking at the fire.

The obvious conclusion is that he was fishing, or hinting too. But I really don't think that was the case. He had not a scrap of malice beforehand, nor triumph after he said it. Yet I don't think it was an accident either. Wolfram, I think, has that kind of suggestible mind. He had seen the proverb once that day, connected with me, and it occurred to him again when our conversation suggested it. Only, being the snob he is, he said "shoeing a horse" where Asgrim said "make our dough rise." I was dying to ask him which was the most common form of it, but I had not the courage. I could not have done it naturally. So I had to sit and let him tell me, in a random kind of way, about the various beliefs connected with the gods: Thor strength, Frey fertility—just as one might expect, and Wolfram is not the man to make that interesting. And while he talked, I suppose because he had given my mind such a jolt, my thoughts fairly roared, like a fire when you poke it.

It seemed to me very significant that Asgrim chose bread. As if he were connecting the leaven that raises the lumpish dough with the action of his great thoughts, which elevate trivia, and both these with the distant, separate grandeur of the gods themselves. He might have said "they work large, they work small"—or that these were the same thing. But that is surely only another way of connecting your impressions. I still think he asked me the same thing in another way.

As for Wolfram, I cannot think why, instead of calling soldiers, summoning Hrinkle and having my rooms searched, he sat in front of my fire telling me about the gods. While I thought and he talked, I noticed, in the same quiet, beyond-despairing way, that every so often he called me

thee or *thou*. It struck me as so ominous that, by way of forcing the issue, I decided to ask him about it.

"Tell me," I said. "In the North we say *thee* and *thou* to those beneath us and those we think ill of. Is it the same here?"

Wolfram thought about it. He thought so strenuously that I am sure no one had asked him to consider the rationale of it before. "I don't think so," he said. "No. I think not. You call your friends and fellows" (he meant equals, I think) "*thou*. And those you love. I would give anything to be calling Kjarten *thou*."

That was odd again. I had to let him go on about Kjarten some more while I thought it out in my turn. It looks as if they use it like the French use *Tu*. In which case, I suppose I am to consider myself on easy terms with Wolfram. Then, in heaven's name, what does he intend? I have spent most of the night worrying. This morning I wrote to Asgrim: "Your saying is good, since it gathers small and great into one, all needing leaven. But you still asked the same question twice. You should leave that and go on to other things. And take more care. Wolfram would give his eyes to harm you."

Now I think that in my effort to put my ideas into what I know of his dialect, I have contrived to sound bossy and peevish, not to speak of melodramatic about Wolfram. But what could I do? Short of calling him *thou,* which would be both presumptuous and unnatural, there is no way of squashing friendship into a small strip of paper.

He was pensive again today. It was raining hard, and the guards irritably ordered him in. Edwin tells me the rivers are flooding all over. The civil war is held up for the moment. I must ask Wolfram what is really going on.

•

Bother Wolfram. He takes up time so. But I did find out from him that Edwin's account is substantially true. There is a stasis at present. People of Hathriver and Widburn are carrying on sporadic guerrilla warfare. Hilda and Hugh are toying with peace and have sent envoys to Regan. The only active person is their mother, who, it seems, has installed herself in this Widfell place and talks of resisting to the death. Hrinkle has done some fairly nasty purging in Gardale, which Wolfram seems to regret mildly. But he has no sympathy with my horror. He claims that, beside the dead lord of Gardale, Hrinkle is as gentle as a child. In a glum way, he seems to see his side as in the right, but he has no convictions about it. He has no convictions about anything. I could shake him.

•

Now here has nearly a week of rain gone by and I have been too disheartened to write much at anything. There was nothing to say. Edwin

and Wolfram between them would depress Pangloss, and Hobby has been off duty with another bout of flu. Poor Hobby. He looked so ill this morning that I wished I had something to give him. But I had nothing. He brought me another message too, bless him. That was a relief. I have not seen Asgrim all this time. The rain was too heavy. I only went out for short intervals, and if Asgrim was out too I must have missed him. But he is all right, though it is plain the old treadmill has been working just the same. "True," he says. "I asked twice. But this of leaven was a new thought. Tell me, if truth is this leaven through all things, is it the same as the laws of a kingdom?" The picture on the back might be a tree, with some sort of a man who might be climbing it, or hanging from it somehow. I don't know what it is supposed to be. This makes half of at least four pictures. He must have four more in hand to put his problems on. I wish he had said something about Wolfram, or at least promised to be careful.

In England the answer would be easy. I would say No, it's the spirit behind the laws. But I have been looking through what I have written in my Rational Prose about the laws here (and I shall ask Wolfram this afternoon) and I am not sure the spirit of the law here is what Asgrim or I would regard as the truth. They seem to have some rather savage customs. For instance, if a man or woman is killed, they have a monetary value. The killer seems to have to pay a certain sum either to a relative (if the victim is yeoman or highborn) or to the overlord (if the victim was a thrall). And if the killer cannot or will not pay, Edwin tells me he is outlawed. Outlawry seems a poor way (and dangerous) to beg the question. You must end up with a band of cutthroats. And, on first thoughts, it seemed to me that to price a body at so much was plain barbarous. People are not *things*.

Then I had second thoughts, to some extent. We certainly object to a state of mind in which everything has its exact equivalent in money—you end up costing inspiration, art and morality. Yet, in England, this is what we do, more and more. A symphony or a picture comes to be regarded as being worth so much, or so much. And this valuing seems to entail a curious tenderness about people—a man is a human, he carries insurance, he has precious rights; so that if anyone kills him, or he kills anyone, we either demand his life in return or, nowadays, with a tender sort of barbarity, we demand *part* of his life and require that he lives some years of life in death in a jail. Believe you me, that is no joke.

The laws here seem to imply an opposite state of mind, in which most objects in life are without price, but men are held to be of limited value once they are corpses—as if, once dead, they had indeed become *things*. You do not destroy one man for destroying another. Life looks to the living. They pay, and are at liberty to recompense society if they can. To go on living is a way to help your fellows, after all. In a way, this man-

ner of thinking has more hope to it than ours. The only trouble is that this does not make much of a deterrent against killing—but this may be merely my insular point of view.

•

I asked Wolfram. He droned out his disjected phrases for an hour, as I was afraid he would. He does know about law, no question. It seems I have the substance right. The administration of the system varies from place to place. Wolfram repeatedly cited Hathriver, where, it seems, justice is traditionally administered humanely and progressively. Asgrim evidently had local history behind him, but in his hands, Wolfram admits, the system flourished as never before. The decisions of Hathriver are still followed by the rest of the country. Well. Now I see what I shall reply. It will have to be the spirit behind the law at Hathriver.

I said that this morning. The answer came with the afternoon fuel. Hobby, still white and poorly, hauls it out of his boot with a respectful grin. I no longer feel quite such a fraud, and I grinned back. For, in a way, Hobby is right to think of these messages as important to him. I see where Asgrim is tending. He is, as I thought, one of those who need to rest their decisions on some kind of philosophical basis, and it looks as if the leaven-idea was something of a breakthrough for him. There is a goddess on the back of this one, which says: "You have done me a great kindness. Tell me then how you would like to see this kingdom ruled." Tall order, for one slip of paper, but I will do my best. We were out together briefly this morning, and it was good to see him. He looked pale, but not unhappy. The roofs were black with the wet, and it came on to pour after a minute or so. But the sight of him has heartened me to try to give him his difficult answer.

It was not easy to answer Asgrim at the best of times. Now, with all that has been going on, I have hardly had a moment to think of modes of government—let alone set them down on a strip of paper. And even if I do, it is possible that there will be no Hobby to take it in the morning. All the same, I am crouching here in my chair, wrapped in cloak and blanket, with this absurd little tiny lamp actually on my paper, so that my pen splutters ink on it, trying to sort out my thoughts before the fire dies completely. I can scarcely think for hope and dejection and doubt.

Let me tell it in order.

Wolfram arrived soon after I had laid down my pen to think what I should answer. He was in an odd agitated mood. He sat in the usual chair and stared at the fire. The wood was damp, so that it smoked heavily and, every so often, flared to a fizzling spurt and steamed; and Wolfram's conversation, I swear, was exactly represented by that fire.

He sat and glowered for a while, and then suddenly burst out with: "I hate Mark!" I said I agreed, from what I'd seen of the place. I asked him what the town was like, but he had gone damp again and said: "Oh, all right." Then, after a little, he flared out again and said he wished he could go and live in the mountains by Widmark, not in this dreary town where no one knew anything and no one cared anyway. I asked him what was so good about the mountains, and he said he didn't know. Then he began to fizzle out a few more remarks, from which I gathered that he had once been on holiday there when he was a boy. He had these wonderful, golden, idyllic memories of the place that you do get from your childhood.

I thought this was a sign of grace. I tried to tell him that this was the kind of grand and holy thing one could live by. Maybe I was crass. Anyhow, Wolfram went all mulish and said that was not what he meant at all. It seems, from what he said, that his excitement had been due to a contrivance like an Alpine railway. He had ridden in a seat dangling from a hawser and had so arrived at the place where some kind of engine worked the lift. It was the engine he had loved. They did not have engines in Mark—this seemed to be his complaint.

Somehow, I was rather surprised to hear they had engines at all. I have been thinking of the place as totally pre-industrial—quite wrongly, I now know. Wolfram, in his dampest, dreariest manner, tells me that there are contrivances of many kinds: the Lowlands use steam pumps, Gardale has a mechanical funfair, they mine coal in Widburn on what I should call a large commercial scale, except that most of this coal seems to go to drive a bank of steam-organs in Hathriver, which are accounted one of the wonders of the place. But no one appears to use a machine where a man would do. Wolfram was rather outraged that I should think of such a thing. Machines are either grossly serviceable or plain fun. Then I said What about using a machine to provide light? But it seems they do that too, almost everywhere except Mark. Each place organizes its own supply, and only Mark is backward in this.

"Thou sees why I think it's a hole?" Wolfram said. I did. I was about to ask if they used machines in warfare, when Wolfram broke out into a tirade against Mark for being a hole and a dump and a place with no future. It is not even one of the major lordships, to hear Wolfram. Hrinkle is an upstart—the uncreative kind, a grabber of good things from other places, with no concern to better his own holding. According to Wolfram, Hrinkle quite cynically made use of the outcry over the freeing of the thralls for his own ends. I had not realised that Wolfram hated him so. But then, again, I am not sure that Wolfram does hate him. Some trouble lies behind this outburst. Wolfram is upset and depressed, and I

wish I could be sure of the reason. I can't help remembering that he didn't mention Kjarten once this afternoon.

Kjarten is the trouble, you see. Edwin came rolling and reeking in at suppertime, with a great fuss and importance of winks and leers and "Shall I tell you, or shall I not?" It was plain he was bursting with news, but he wanted me to ask him. He wanted to get me so curious that I would come off my high horse and ask him. Hobby seemed equally excited. His face was bright pink and his eyes glistened.

So I began on a sort of parley with Edwin, as if we were a couple of diplomats: I would climb down a peg or so, if Edwin would tell me a fact—only, of course, we neither of us said so in so many words. And while we parleyed, Hobby went dutifully about, venting every minute a most startlingly hoarse and hollow cough. Before long, it occurred to me that Hobby was badly ill. When I looked closely, I could see his eyes were standing out and fixed, so that you could really see the eyeball as half an orb, and the light catching the iris as it stared. The flush was pure fever. I could feel the heat off him whenever he came near. I grew so troubled about him that I lost patience with Edwin's manoeuvering entirely. I told him to stop it and just to tell me, please. He was delighted, but, I think, a little disappointed in his easy triumph. But he told me, and Hobby came near to listen too. I get the feeling that Hobby had been itching to hear it told. Maybe he had dragged himself up here on purpose, for he is not always on duty at supper.

There is a rumour that Kjarten has escaped. I dare put it no higher than that. Edwin has chapter and verse for it, but, since I have been talking to Wolfram, I have come to know that Edwin has chapter and verse for a number of things which are entirely untrue. Or, as far as I know, untrue. I wish I dared believe this. According to Edwin, Kjarten escaped from Markwater two days ago disguised as a maidservant. It seems that this disguise and his transport were both arranged for from outside and somehow smuggled in to him. There has been hue and cry after him ever since, but, Edwin says, he has gone to ground very thoroughly and Hrinkle can find no trace of him at all. There is no question that Edwin thinks the whole thing a very pretty piece of organization and rather admires whoever managed it. So would I, if only I knew it were true. I was forced to enact a little hearty delight for Edwin's benefit—I felt I owed him that—before I asked him how he knew. His source is not very satisfactory. He "heard say in Mark."

Then, I am afraid I turned to the matter of poor Hobby and tried to impress on Edwin (and on Hobby himself) that Hobby is really ill. Hobby looked glassily sheepish and said he "would do"—accompanying his assertion with another reverberant cough which seemed to me to con-

tradict it flatly. Edwin claimed that if Hobby said he would do, then he *would* do, and I could get no further until Edwin came to lock up. Then I think I impressed him—not with pity—with my own concern. I went right up to the old horror and even took hold of his greasy and splattered coat, and I begged and implored him to see that Hobby went to bed and, if possible, had a doctor. I said I didn't want to see him in this state (that is the kind of selfish statement Edwin understands) and ended by hinting that if Edwin cared about me at all he would do what I asked. I flattered him and I pleaded—oh, it was a disgraceful exhibition, but if it does Hobby any good, I don't mind. I'd do it again. Edwin grudgingly agreed that he would "look to it." That was all I could wring from him. I suspect I have given him a sense of power by twice grovelling to him in one evening, and he is not one to make concessions in his turn. He is going to lord it over me tomorrow, I know he is.

Oh dear, I have trimmed the lamp and it still flickers. But I *must* go on. This rumour bothers me so. If it were true, it's marvellous: Kjarten free, with a chance to grow up pleasant, and a weight off Asgrim's mind. Hope for Hathriver, too, since Kjarten at least is a figurehead for them. This ought to stiffen resistance and prolong the mopping-up by years—unless (Lord! what a ghastly thought) Hrinkle offers to kill Asgrim unless Kjarten is returned. Let's hope he dare not. But I see it's not all roses, even if it is true. And how do I know it *is* true? I am oppressed by Wolfram's strange behaviour. I have come to see, dreadfully clearly, what a closed circuit my sources of information might be. Neither Wolfram nor Edwin have any reason to tell me the truth: I am supposed to be their enemy. And if Edwin believes this rumour and tells me it in good faith, it may only be that Wolfram has put it about, knowing Edwin will tell me. If he did, then it must be with a view to tempting me or Asgrim to some indiscretion—giving us enough rope to hang ourselves. Then what? I am certain that the rumour, true or false, will be studiously kept from Asgrim—if true, to ensure his continued good behaviour; if false, so that I might tell him, upon which he might make some move he has not hitherto dared make, thus convicting us both. But then Hobby Now the lamp

•

The lamp died on me. I have been thinking all night in the dark. Now the sun is just up—and a fine day for the moment, at least—and I shall set my conclusions down. I must tell Asgrim about Kjarten. It seems only right, since it is possible no one else will, but I shall make it clear that I have no confirmation of it. I shall have to risk his taking action of some kind—I know enough of him to believe he will—but in these dark watches I have seen that I have put myself at risk for months now, with this writing. What is one more risk in a good cause?

So much for that. Now, his question. I think he is thinking along these sort of lines: "If I ever get out of here, should I seize power and make myself king, relying on my good intentions to constitute a "truth" running through the whole?" And he has asked me if I should like to see it. But to do this is to be another Hrinkle, with the best will in the world. And his successor might not be so right-minded.

Now I know that there is no political set-up ever invented that is not open to abuse in the wrong hands, *but*—in the light of Asgrim's own notion of "truth," which one can take to be a kind of informing genius—I have been studying to grasp the present system here. Even in the throes of civil war, seen through Edwin's strong-coloured inaccuracies and Wolfram's drabber discourse, it comes out rather well. The country is divided into regions called *marks*—each with highly individual characteristics and each largely self-governing. These, in turn, are grouped into larger units under the twelve overlords. It almost seems as if the "truth" of Dalemark is in this apparent diversity with its kind of ramshackle overall unity.

What is to prevent the twelve overlords being brought into a closer unity, in a council, say, with one of their number presiding and—in times of stress only—being given more absolute power? That seems to suit the genius of the country, and in the right hands it might work. I think, too (having been brought up in a democracy), that the lower orders should have their say in the business of the marks, and that the thralls should most certainly be freed and join the rest of the lower ranks as equals. How to say this on one strip of paper? I have used three already, and have them hidden ready to burn. Now to try again.

"The truth is in the marks. I would see them kept, and their overlords brought together into one council, with one among them to have the last word and, in times of trouble only, to hold the rank of king. The thralls should be freed and all lesser men given a say in the doings of the marks. Then the truth of Hathriver might leaven the whole. I have heard it said Kjarten escaped three days ago, but this may be false. Emily." Well, that will have to do. I think I hear Edwin. And I am a fool. What shall I do if Hobby has been sent to bed again?

•

Hobby was there, pale and damp. His teeth kept chattering, poor boy, and when I touched his wrist it felt icy. But he swore he felt better. Edwin swore he *was* better and stumped off to open the doors. So I gave Hobby my note, feeling strong compunction at asking this of him when he was not well. The worst of it is, if the rumour is an attempt to incriminate us, Hobby will suffer as much as anyone. Let's hope he is old campaigner enough to look out for himself if the worst happens.

I could not resist kneeling down beside him on the hearth—that was when I touched his wrist—and saying: "Hobby, you will take care of yourself, won't you?"

A double-entendre which I believe Hobby understood. He grinned a little. He said: "I'll do," and produced his nasty cough again.

"Please do," I said, and then Edwin stumps in and finds me kneeling there. He was so peevish about it that I could swear he was jealous, childishly jealous, that I was concerned about Hobby and yet turned not a hair at the thought of Edwin's poor feet, rarely so painful. Rarely so fiddlestick. But I had to butter him up a bit for fear he would revenge himself on Hobby. The last twelve hours have really put me under Edwin's thumb, good and proper. At this rate, I shall be licking his boots tomorrow.

•

Oh ye gods! Oh ye gods! The fat is in the fire now, properly. And not at all in the way I expected. If my God has no power in this strange place, I shall pray to the ones who have. But I don't think these strange gods know mercy. Mercy is what I need. Matters are out of my hands now. And to think that only half an hour ago I was walking in the brisk Spring sunshine smiling over at Asgrim and he at me. I was wondering what he would make of my prescription for the government of his country, and he, by the looks of it, was in a state of pleasant anticipation, enjoying the bright new weather.

Then out comes Wolfram, all pinched and glowering, and kicks the wall beside me, really viciously, looking broodingly over at Asgrim.

I felt fairly secure this time. My writing was on a shelf in the bedroom, with some of my hairs threaded between the pages, so that I should *know* at least if someone examined it (No one did. There was no need). "What's the matter?" I said to Wolfram, and he kicked the wall again. "Well, what is it?" I said.

Wolfram began to swear. The way they swear here makes my gorge rise. I simply can't write it down—and I thought *I* could be fairly foulmouthed. Wolfram took Asgrim and Asgrim's mother and the gods to pieces with the utmost obscenity—and assembled them again back to front—before he stopped. Then I said again what was the matter. He said: "Come inside. I don't want him to hear," jabbing a knuckle over Asgrim's way—Asgrim was watching us rather carefully, and I don't blame him.

"But he can't hear from here," I said.

"I don't care," says Wolfram, and stumps off indoors. I felt I had to follow, because I didn't like to leave him alone to read my writing. I waved to Asgrim, who waved soberly back, and went in to find Wolfram stuck across the usual chair with his legs stretched out and his toes turned in, the picture of sulky fury.

"That talk," he said. "It's true."

"What talk?" I said, very careful. I could have danced to think it was true. I actually thanked my stars I had told Asgrim.

"Oh, didn't thou know?" said Wolfram. "Kjarten. Yesterday everyone was saying Kjarten had got away, and I tried not to believe it. But it's true. He's gone. Three days ago. Hrinkle came here this morning raving mad about it. And it's all right for him. He's been seeing Kjarten almost once a week, but what about *me?*"

I hope I never have to listen again to such a childish whining tirade as that. Wolfram threw himself about in his chair, railing at his bad luck, Hrinkle's unfair good luck, shedding tears, squalling that nobody loved him. Then he wiped his nose on the back of his hand, sat forward and began on Asgrim. He seems convinced that Asgrim organised Kjarten's escape somehow—though I don't see how he could have done—and swore that Asgrim did it to keep Kjarten away from him, and that he would be even yet. Oh, on and on. Then he went on to his lovely lost Kjarten. And it was on the tip of my tongue to say that Wolfram had just as much chance of having Kjarten now as he ever had, when he was off on Hrinkle again, clawing and picking at the chair in his misery, jerking out things about blood and birth and let Hrinkle wait and see, until I suddenly realised—and so did Wolfram—that he had one of my strips of paper in his hand. He must have pulled it out of the chair in his clawings. He held it in both hands and stared at it in a puzzled way. He kept on, meanwhile, with his tirade, but the phrases came out slower and slower and with less conviction as he became more and more preoccupied with the strip of paper.

At length, he looked over at me to see if I could explain the mystery. I looked back, without any particular feeling that I know of. I remember thinking: "You work it out for yourself, my lad. You don't expect me to help you, do you?" But I didn't feel derision, or defiance, or even apprehension. It was as if everything was in abeyance, waiting for Wolfram's mind to bite on the problem.

He stopped talking after a while and thought about it, pulling the paper backwards and forwards, and wrapping it round his knuckly left forefinger. Then it seemed to occur to him to look for more where this came from. He turned round and searched, down by the arm of the chair, and turned back holding the six or so strips that remained there. These he spread out in a fan and contemplated in turn, bending the tops, noticing, I think, where I had dirtied the edges to prevent them showing. It seemed to me that he thought about them for hours and hours and, looking back, I suppose it was the oddest thing. Both of us sat calmly there, and Wolf-

ram never said a word. Nor did I. Once, Wolfram turned to me and seemed to be going to say something. But he thought better of it, shut his mouth, and bent over the papers again. After a while, he began to flap them softly against the palm of his hand, staring into the fire and whistling a little between his teeth. I just have not the faintest idea what was going on in his head.

Then he left, still not having said a word. He just got up, put the paper in his pocket, and, shooting me a funny dubious look, simply went out. The moment the bolt went home outside the door I began to shake all over. My teeth chattered. I know tears were pouring down my face as I went flying out into the court to see if, by any blessed chance, Asgrim was still there. He was not, of course. I had been too long indoors watching Wolfram's mind work.

Oh God, don't let them harm Hobby! Let no one connect this with Asgrim. I hope I shall be brave enough not to tell.

Edwin's late with lunch. I can tell by the sun. What does that mean? I'm jumping at the slightest noise. No, here he comes.

•

In a bad mood. Feet killing him and he can't find Hobby. That must mean the worst. I hope Hobby made off and hasn't been caught. Edwin asked why I had such a high colour. I nearly told him Fear. Haven't been able to eat. Each time I hear a noise, jump away from my incriminating writing and end up, quite involuntarily, in the courtyard. Wonder if I mean to throw myself off when they come. You can't talk of meaning. I have no intentions and no will.

•

I think Wolfram is right. The gods here are pitiless. They offer nothing to humans but retribution—no kindness, no morality, nothing. My punishment seems to be total isolation. I have seen no one but Edwin for a week now. I have had no heart to write before this. It was all too painful.

Soon after Edwin left, I heard Wolfram's voice, distantly, from over the way. I was in the courtyard after the first syllable, dreading to see what I saw. Asgrim was out there, standing between two guards. He never once looked at me. And Wolfram was there, gesturing overbearingly at the other four guards, who were in and out of the door I can't see, carrying things and throwing them in a heap in the yard. There were bits of chairs, tables, portions of beds, bedding, carpets—every conceivable kind of furnishing, and all of it ripped to pieces.

Asgrim watched each piece as it came, so totally without expression that he seemed to have lost all his personal characteristics. I remember no privacy or integrity about him at all—nothing that was not just generally

human. I think that was the worst thing I saw. He simply stood there, as blank as a new house or an empty landscape. I suppose he knew discovery was inevitable.

That came when they struggled out with two halves of a big oak table. Wolfram held up a hand, yapping at them to wait, and pounced. I saw him work like a terrier at its underneath. A leg came off and he threw it aside; and finally he stood up triumphantly with two sheets of paper. Even from here I could see they were singed and scrawled upon. But I think there was writing on the back of one. Asgrim shrugged as Wolfram turned it over and scanned it and then ran shouting to the doorway. Hrinkle came out then. I could just see his head, and his hand snatching the paper from Wolfram. And I heard the great roar of laughter he gave. He clapped Wolfram on the back, and Wolfram looked odiously, smirkingly pleased. Then Hrinkle beckoned to the guards to bring Asgrim inside again, and they all crowded in after him, leaving nothing but the great heap of broken furniture in the yard.

That was all. The rest happened indoors. I was out there most of the day, and that was all I saw, but even if I had not heard Edwin, it would be clear to me that it is not merely an order for close confinement that keeps Asgrim out of the yard. Hrinkle wanted to know all about those messages, and he can no longer use Kjarten as a threat. Hrinkle has gone today, thank God. Edwin tells me that the old lady of the Lowlands is marching, despite the floods, to join the folk of Widburn.

Oh but Edwin claims to know all about it. He can't let the matter drop. Edwin has had a field day, indescribably horrible, of tender curiosity, veiled sadism, malignant revelation of hard fact, and howling glee once he discovered that his claim to know all about it had me hanging on his words. I think the tender curiosity is worst. He tries to plumb my feelings, and Asgrim's, with a sort of gentle, ardent prurience. Asgrim's sufferings appall him, genuinely, in every nasty detail. They trouble him deliciously. He is like someone with a skin disease, scratching. He seems quite aware that Wolfram discovered Asgrim's hoard of paper after talking to me, and he wants to know how and why, oh desperately. I can't stop him probing. I am too sick with myself. Sick!

It might be said that I could not have prevented it, but I know I could have done. I let Wolfram's queer assumption of friendship take me in utterly. How completely sickens me. I knew what Wolfram is—devious, out for his own advantage as strongly and instinctively as the flea I caught from Edwin just now, capable of using his own genuine feelings to his main end—and I took his camaraderie at face-value. Instead of boring him out of my prison, I encouraged him. And of course the longer he sat in that chair, the more likely it was he would discover what I had

packed it with. Oh fool. Fool. And Asgrim must be a fool too if he does not realise that I somehow gave him away. He must have seen me in the courtyard, watching, with my stupid, evident anxiety, and he could have seen I was unharmed. He must think I bargained his safety for mine, particularly as I think he did not get my last message. Oh, round and round. I have been over how much he must despise me so many times in my head. I prayed that Wolfram might set Hrinkle on me too, but he never did, and now Hrinkle has gone. Why he never did I can't quite see, but I suspect the reason is that Wolfram always had a fairly just estimate of my irrelevance. Under his gaucheness and his stupidity, Wolfram has this terrible flea-like instinct for what is important.

So I am condemned to safety. And Asgrim— The worst is— I must get myself to write it— If I see him again, he will not be the same. Edwin tells me Hrinkle broke him. He says Asgrim screamed and cried and begged Hrinkle to stop. He was reduced, violated, childish, blubbering, not a person any longer. God, I find it so appalling that I keep trying not to believe it! Edwin says Hrinkle had Asgrim kiss his foot. My head goes blank on that. For a moment I think none of it is true. But of course it is. My spirit is not proof against pain. Why should his be?

And Hobby is dead. Poor Hobby. It is a condemnation of me that whenever I think of Hobby my first regret is that he does not seem to have delivered my last note. Not that I know. It has not, so far as I know, been found on Hobby, but probably nobody looked. Why should they? Nobody, not even Edwin, seems to have suspected Hobby of any part in this. And Hobby seems to have bravely toiled about his duties in the stronghold until some time on the day Wolfram discovered the paper. Then, being unable to go on, he curled up at the corner of some stairway and died. They did not find him until the evening. Edwin told me that night, in the midst of all the other news, and thought no more of it than that it was very inconvenient of Hobby to go and die just then without giving anyone notice of his intention. I keep shocking myself by thinking the same callous thing in another way. Poor Hobby. He deserves better of me at least. Deluded he may have been, but his reliability and sangfroid amaze me now when I think of him. It is very bad not to accord him consideration in death, if not in life. Very bad. And yet, poor boy, he was one of those born not to be considered. I do not mean that he was a thrall (which Edwin tells me was indeed the case), I mean that he was simply humble and unlovely, as useful as a saw or a hammer—and just as you are irritated if the handle is loose on either of these, so you were irritated if Hobby showed any personal feelings about anything. Not fair. Not fair at all. I keep reminding myself that Hobby was a human being too.

•

Dear, how the days pass! I think Spring is here. The air is smooth and mild now. Edwin tells me the floods are abating. Hrinkle is preparing to be very vigorous in the Lowlands. But nothing has happened. I do not like this new boy of Edwin's. He is a knowing little beast, as nasty-minded as Edwin and as self-seeking as Wolfram. Ye gods, I miss Hobby. Every day that passes I miss him more. I had not realised what stoic values he quietly represented. Hobby gave me a faith in human nature that I find hard to hold to now.

•

Human nature? Faith? I don't know. I am in a stupid flutter, compounded of the wrong and the right reasons. What am I to make of this?

There were Edwin's steps on the stairs just now, and others, heavy and ringing, which I did not know. Then the door opens and Edwin appears, backwards, saying: "This here's the one. Two minutes, mind. My time's not my own." Then he lets edge in round him an enormous, soldierly man, and whisks away again, locking the door behind him.

The huge man stood there, staring round the room and at me, in a brisk, matter-of-fact way, and then gave me a nodding kind of bow—which is possibly customary here. He was very dark, as well as very big, and I must say I have seldom seen anyone with such firm, clean, kindly good looks. There was an air of cheerfulness and sanity about him which disconcerted me utterly—feeling, as I do, the opposite of both these days. Besides, it is such an age since I have been near a personable man—or a kindly one—that I seem to have forgotten how to behave. I blushed, ludicrously. It was ludicrous because, throughout our interview, the man was most tidily respectful and did not, quite evidently, find me interesting as a female. You know how you can tell. In my bad and fluttered state of mind, I have been looking earnestly in the mirror to see why. I can't. I do not look as dingy as I feel. Perhaps I am not his type. Such a pity—he was a regular charmer.

Anyway, fluttering apart, I had a distinct impression that I had seen the man before, but I could not imagine where. You would think him impossible to miss. "Please, who are you?" I said.

"You may have seen me, lady," he said. "Guard on Asgrim, over the way there."

And I said: "Oh yes, of *course!*" He is the one I think of as Swart-one. He gives quite a different impression over the way—or gave it. Asgrim's personality always eclipsed his guards—or did. Maybe not now—but I don't want to think of it.

Then he said—Swart-one: I still don't know his name—a little awkwardly and pompously, as people like him do when they are delivering a

message: "He—prisoner in our charge—anxious to know if you are in health and asked me to do the errand."

I was touched by that. It dawned on me that Asgrim, far from despising me, had no means of knowing that Wolfram had not turned on me later that day. I asked Swart-one to assure him that I was perfectly all right and, as I said, I wished I was not. For he is bound to despise me now, if he didn't before. How can he fail to? It looks so bad that I am left unharmed—I wonder if Wolfram meant it to, curse him. But, at the time, that was only a passing thought. I was much more anxious to know how Asgrim was. Yet I was so afraid of hearing terrible things, and so put out by Swart-one's clean cheerful presence, that I stammered out the enquiry in the most reluctant and guilty way. I hope Swart-one does not report in detail—but I think he won't: he didn't strike me as someone who was good at describing things.

He said reticently: "Things have been bad over there." I stammered out that I realised that. So he said, kindly: "They're bettering. He's on his feet again now. We do our best for him, you know. You mustn't think too ill of us for what we did under orders." He had such a monumental neutrality about him that I found myself looking down vistas of physical horror and felt quite ill. I said wretchedly that I quite understood, and that made him kinder than ever. "I always do what I can for him," he assured me. "He's a man you have to look up to."

"Even when he's insulting you?" I said. There was that scene in the yard. I remember clearly that Swart-one nearly hit Asgrim. But I'm afraid I said it out of pure desire to flatter Swart-one—or nearly pure: I didn't believe he was sincere in what he said.

And he grinned a loyal and affectionate grin—about this and other incidents, I suppose. "Things he says, lady. He has a tongue like no one else—and we've had a deal of it lately, I can tell you. But, seeing how things are, we bear with it."

It was altogether schoolboyish, the way he said that, in its genuine admiration. And I think the forbearance is genuine too. Asgrim is not so badly off as he might be. Swart-one said quite a bit more—all in his short stilted sentences and his odd clipped accent, which is Markwater speech, according to Edwin—both about his admiration and about the various comforts and small illicit freedoms he and his fellows have given Asgrim lately. It seems as if he and his fellows are prepared to do anything within reason for him. Or they are now. Much as I wished to think Swart-one sincere in all this, I couldn't help wondering how much of what he said had its origins in guilt. They helped reduce Asgrim to this state, after all. As to that state, it came through the clipped discourse rather clearly that

Asgrim is sick and querulous and behaving near-on as childishly as Kjarten. Nothing will possess him to show gratitude. This is what Swart-one principally admires him for. It doesn't strike me as admirable, but then think of the cause. He probably hates their guts.

"And now nothing will please him," says Swart-one, "but that one of us should bring you the writing. I said it should be me. But have the goodness to say I brought you nothing but word of mouth, lady."

Of course I promised. He pulled this paper from his pocket and gave it me. Then he knocked at the door and Edwin had let him out before I could find out whether Asgrim had written it recently or long ago—I'm sure he hardly stayed the two minutes Edwin specified. It is odd how such a short space can bulk so large. I keep dwelling on his visit as if it had lasted two hours. But I wish he had stayed long enough to tell me when this verse was written. It is so hard to tell—except that I doubt if Asgrim has paper these days. From its looks, it could be the sheet Wolfram got out of the table. It is the other half of the last drawing—curious: the only other half I have had—of the man in the tree. Woden, of course. He hanged himself on the world-tree in search of knowledge. I have the rest of the Ash, the ravens, the well at its foot, and the noose from which the god stiffly dangles. I shall put the verse down shortly, once I have decided how and why it came now.

No. It came openly, or nearly openly. It has the air of ends tied up after the recent nasty mess. And it would not have come if anyone thought it important. I can only conclude that Asgrim told Hrinkle of his correspondence with me. I see I have known he must have done, ever since Edwin told me But To find out this way is so shaming, is what I'm trying to say; and in having my privacy in this burst apart, I see how shamefully they burst his. I feel laid bare like a frog on a board, so what must he feel? How *could* they? What can there be left? No. I think this must have been written long ago.

But truth, which is another thing
Aside from laws or words or time,
Has strangely entered space,
Lifting the clod from under
Moving men from men asunder
And only leaves us dying.
Truth is the fire that fetches thunder,
Kindled of itself, and only mine
In the heart that had its fashioning.

I wish I knew what the hell it means. I get the feeling that it refers to a complete argument of which I am ignorant—terms, conclusions and all. Or it could be the private vision of a sick mind, which has meaning only for the sufferer—in which case it was written recently. But, in either case, what did he intend to tell me? It's important, I'm sure. I am certain he is trying to tell me what he found out on the treadmill—it has an air of finality, almost triumphant, which I would share if I could. But I can't understand. All I know is that it has brought hard before me Asgrim, grey and vivisected, trying to pull his mind together and come to terms with his captivity again. It moves me to a compassion so wretched that it hurts—a different order of feeling, utterly, than the flutters I keep feeling over Swart-one. How I can have the two feelings simultaneously beats me.

•

Something happened last night. I have been awake ever since, wondering. I wish Edwin would come, but it's only half an hour after sunrise. I shall have to wait an hour or so more to find out what it was. It's unbearable.

There was gunfire for an hour or more. I could see lights out of all three windows, and hear shouting. After a bit, a bell began to ring, insanely. Whoever rang it did not wait for the clapper to return to the centre of the bell, but went on wildly tugging away at the rope so that it banged back and forth, jangling, sometimes striking the bell, sometimes off balance and silent, and then hitting the bell again in a stutter of unresonating bangs. An alarm of some sort. It was clear the whole stronghold was aroused, from the lights and the yelling. Then those guns began. Ye gods! Is Mark besieged, or what? Things are quiet now. They fell quiet after a couple of hours of bedlam. There was a further burst of activity a little before dawn, nothing so loud as the first, and now silence. A cold, pink, silent dawn. Come quickly, Edwin, you garrulous old fool. I must know what has happened.

•

I can hardly believe it. Asgrim has escaped. I can't tell whether to call it desolate joy or splendid misery. He got away last night in that confusion, and it sounds as if it was all very carefully planned. How, I cannot think. And Edwin's narrative is so muddled—he was beside himself with excitement, and that wretched child Albert, his new help, muddled things further by telling me repeatedly how it was he who had rung the alarm bell.

"First thing I thought to do," he kept saying. "I was up there in my shirt, nothing but my shirt on, pulling away. Did you hear the great noise I made?"

I told him I did and to shut up, but he is not the child to shut up when he has something to boast of. So I had to listen to Edwin through

his inane clamour, and I doubt if I have got Edwin's facts straight, let alone the truth of the matter.

I gather he laid out a guard and got out of a window, and thence over the roofs of the fortress to the town. Somebody helped him over the walls of the stronghold, because there was a rope-ladder found later. But, meanwhile, as soon as he was on his way, a man called Harold appeared in front of the town and launched some kind of attack on it. This was the first part of the noise. I suppose the idea was a diversion. Naturally, this aroused the remaining guards and Asgrim's escape was discovered. They assumed he had gone to join this man Harold and went racing off in the wrong direction. Edwin says everything was in frantic confusion for a couple of hours, until Harold was beaten off and chased northwards by the defending militia. And I gather it was a narrow squeak. Harold nearly took the town. Then, just before dawn, they found the rope-ladder on the other side of the stronghold, and there was a further pursuit, this time eastwards, in the right direction. But it seems Asgrim had by then got clear away. It sounds to have been a night of rare confusion. Edwin says Hrinkle has taken most of the troops away south with him, which accounts for Harold's near-success.

Lord, I am thankful Asgrim made it. When I consider what I have heard of the state of his mind and body, I can only call it miraculous. Edwin agrees with me. He persists in understanding it even less than I do. It seems Wolfram is about to interrogate the five remaining guards—the sixth died this morning—and perhaps something will emerge from that.

•

Yes, something has emerged all right. I feel a bit rueful. Edwin is all scathing indignation spiced with covert applause, and I must say it was cool of Asgrim. He obviously has not his reputation for nothing. It is now certain that he was not as badly hurt as he made everyone believe. He put on quite a performance of weakness, fretfulness and disorder of mind. He complained of obscure pains, and insisted that he had received some kind of internal injury—medicine, it seems, is not Mark's strong suit—and they swallowed it. The guards gave him their half guilty sympathy and, if Swart-one is anything to go by, a good deal of admiration for his colourful grumbling. I am afraid they were truly taken in. It looks as if the arrangements for this escape were made through their innocent connivance. Edwin has not got the details yet, but he tells me that one of them actually procured him a file. They took messages, obligingly, which seemed innocuous but are now thought to have had a double meaning (I wish I knew what the one I got means). And they actually stood by while Asgrim exercised to ensure that he would be able to hoist himself onto the roof. Asgrim, it seems, would arise, grumbling and fretting, complain-

ing of terrible stiffness and shooting pains in his side, and would declare that the only thing which eased it was to hang by his hands from a beam in one of the rooms. So they let him, appalled, so Edwin tells me, at the way the effort of it would send the sweat soaking through his clothes and filling his hair, and never guessing why it was done. It is such a splendid piece of opportunism that you would almost think Hrinkle did Asgrim a favour, injuring him. I could laugh. Though I wish it had not been Swartone that Asgrim killed.

•

No news of Asgrim yet. But this Harold, whom I now find to be lord of Widburn where the massacres were, has gathered more troops and seems to be on his way east to Gardale. Hrinkle is hurrying back, but has not got here yet. And Wolfram today hanged a wretched tradesman—a baker, I believe—for sending Asgrim a cake by one of the guards, which is thought to have held the file.

•

No news today, either. There is another stasis. Hrinkle did not come here. He is posted between the old lady of the Lowlands and her other potential allies. Regan is after Harold before he can join Asgrim, but no one knows where Asgrim has got to.

•

Blight on everything. Wolfram has been here. He is a strange creature. I swear he came to be comforted—and how he has the gall to expect me to be sociable after— But I could see he was not at all sure of his welcome. He fidgeted and stood just inside the door and asked drearily how I was getting on—he was in his dreariest mood. And I was more than a little curt with him at first, until he became so unutterably hangdog that I took pity on him.

We held stilted, semi-cordial conversation. He sat on a different chair, rather self-consciously, and said he thought it was all up with him as soon as Hrinkle came back. Hrinkle would never forgive him for Asgrim's escape, not in a thousand years, even though, he claims, he has acted with great firmness and decision. The firmness, I discovered, was the hanging of the unfortunate baker. And it became increasingly clear that it was the hangings that were upsetting Wolfram. He had hanged the baker and two of his apprentices, since none admitted to the file and each accused the others, and Wolfram, because he is now Governor of the town and stronghold (as a reward for his discovery of the paper), had had to be present at the execution. It had revolted him. He went away and was sick. Then he could not get it out of his mind. He stood it for two days and then came, if you please, to see if I could help him. It makes me wonder what the hell Wolfram thinks our relationship is. Perhaps he doesn't know either.

Anyway, there he was twisting his warty hands and fidgetting his great limp legs and asking me to help him forget it. How could I? He has killed three people in cold blood and will have to take the consequences. All I could say was that perhaps he would think twice before he ordered another hanging. And he said fervently that he would.

Then we got on to the cause of the hangings and, as usual, Wolfram has made the vivid thing commonplace and given plain facts a dreary oddity. He has made Asgrim sound so cynical, so calculating. "I suppose," says Wolfram, "he must have thought it worth all those lives. Hrinkle will hang the five guards, thou knows, and one is dead already. Then there's the three bakers, twenty or so helpers we've not found yet, and all Harold's folk if we had caught them. He must be sure of his worth, don't thou think?"

I said something about the organisation involved. Wolfram said it was luck, and ruthlessness. We had something of an argument. Wolfram agreed that Harold's attack was pre-arranged and said, in a numb kind of way, that Asgrim must have been able to get more messages out than people had realised. But not, he said, after he and Hrinkle found the paper. He assures me that the famous messages Edwin thought the guards carried were entirely to ask for essential things from the town, all of them quite innocent, such as fresh clothes and new shoes. The cake was the only thing which was not what it seemed.

"No," he said. "It was all planned long ago. And, if you ask me, he was lucky to get away with it. Very lucky. The way I read it, the time was fixed around Yule or thereabouts, and when it came he had to up and go, or lose all, whatever shape he was in."

"He was in bad shape, then?" I said.

"Oh yes," said Wolfram. "Very bad shape. Hrinkle did him a deal of harm over the three days."

My stomach turns over to think of the dull calm way Wolfram talked of that. But it was not like the hangings. He didn't see it. Hrinkle sent him away and he only heard about it afterwards. I asked him, and he admitted, with shamed shiftings, that Hrinkle knew he would never stand it. I was furious, all the same, and I was going to tell him so if he had not forestalled me by being indignant on his own account.

"Asgrim makes me sick," he said. "All that false confession and cringing and whimpering—play acting not to get hurt so that he'd be fit to climb when the time came. I'd be ashamed. And what makes me so angry, rarely so angry, is that for all he knew Hrinkle would kill Kjarten as soon as he was gone. *He* didn't know Kjarten was free. You can be sure we kept that from him."

I wish now I had told Wolfram of my last message. I wish I had pretended I knew for certain Asgrim had got it. I would do anything rather than

think so badly of Asgrim, or have Wolfram think it. If he got that message, then it was almost as if I gave him the all-clear and of course he was free to escape. That's how I hope it was. Or Hobby could have told him. But I wish I knew. I can't help thinking that the man who could quietly bash Swart-one's head in might well be quite as ruthless over Kjarten. Oh no. I am convinced that Kjarten's escape was stage-one in a plan they probably settled over Yule, and that stage-two depended on Asgrim hearing, somehow, of Kjarten's safety. And perhaps that had nothing to do with me either.

But I do think Wolfram is right about the rest, the more I consider it. Asgrim, far from using his injuries to get the sympathy of the guards, was nearly prevented by Wolfram's discovery from following out the plans of some months. He has been lucky, and I can only hope he is not suffering too much. But the evidence is clear enough. The fact that I had just half of so many different pictures suggests that many more messages went (perhaps through Hobby) than ever came to me. And the nature of his messages to me suggests that his mind was turning to what he could do once he got out of Mark. I fancy that the quarrels he used to pick with Swart-one and the other guards were part of the scheme. Maybe they were to end up by knocking him down—and then guiltily playing the part they actually played for other reasons. How shall I ever know?

But I wish Wolfram had not been and put all this into my head. It leaves a bad taste. I feel hurt, bitterly and unreasonably, that Asgrim should have been thinking of so many things beside me. I feel afraid, because I don't know how far he is ruthless and how far lucky. I would give the earth to know just a little more.

•

Just a little more! Ye gods! This last week we have heard nothing but Asgrim. Life here is as changed as it is in the rest of the country.

The day after Wolfram came to see me, the country went mad. Asgrim was in Gardale, and Kjarten with him, and they were appealing for all who wore alvery to come to their side. All who wore it came and, Edwin says, many more besides. A large number of people went from Mark and all the remaining soldiers deserted. The North climbed off its fence at last and marched down to aid Asgrim. Wolfram says that at least three-quarters of the population is mustering to Hathriver. Hrinkle was beaten in a battle here—or quite near here—yesterday, before he had time to throw himself into the stronghold, and rumour has it that Asgrim cut his throat in person in the course of it. Now it is the merest mopping up—a much simpler business than Hrinkle had of it.

We in Mark are in a very strange position. For three days, Wolfram was preparing to stand a siege and let Hrinkle in as soon as he got here. Then, on the fourth day, Hrinkle sent word that he would fight on the

plains to the south-west, so the preparations relaxed a little. But the old lady of the Lowlands, and Hilda's lot, sallied out from west and south and forced Hrinkle northwards into the arms of the people mustering at Hathriver. The next news we had was that Hrinkle had turned back and was flying for his life here to Mark, with Asgrim, Harold and the main man from the North all hard on his heels. People jumped into action here again. But, as I said, they caught Hrinkle. There is only Regan to account for now. The whole emphasis of the operation has shifted north and west, and Mark seems to have been by-passed. We seem to have lost all our significance. We huddle in this backwater, waiting, and nothing happens.

I see I have written "We" all the time. Quite in Wolfram's manner of accepting without comment the true state of affairs. We are in this together, the people in this fortress and I. All of us forgotten, hushed and hopeless. I don't know why I go on writing this, except out of habit. There is no longer any need to defy or outwit the powers that be.

Wolfram was here this morning. He came just after Edwin had been and told me about Hrinkle's defeat, with Albert chirpily and obsequiously butting in all through.

Edwin was scared, but in a twitter of excitement all the same. "Mark's finished," he kept saying. "I don't know where I shall turn. We shall all be dead this time next week, as soon as Asgrim gets here." He was farting and belching, I think with sheer apprehension, and ashamed of it for once. He said troubles always made him bilious, and actually apologised. Then he reiterated that he knew not where to turn, and the rest. But I cut in and said Couldn't he run away? "Nowhere to run to," he said. "Countryside's against us. Mark's against us. We must wait for our weird."

"There's no quarter for us Hrinkle's men," says Albert smugly. "We're all dead men now."

Trust Albert to swank about even this, cocksure little devil. I don't suppose for a moment Albert has visualised himself actually dying. He'd sing another tune if he had. Edwin has visualised it, vividly. He is scared stiff, but it adds wonderfully to his notion of poor old ill-treated Edwin.

Wolfram, to do him justice, is a good deal more dignified. He came in very quietly and wandered about the room a little. After a while, he remarked: "Hrinkle's dead. Did they tell thee?"

I said, rather awkwardly, that Edwin had said so and that it was hard on Wolfram.

"Oh," he said, "not really. I'd been expecting it. And I never liked him much." Then he wandered a little more and said: "There's nothing to do now but wait."

"For Asgrim to come?" I said—and when I think of the vibrating hope with which I asked that question I can hardly credit it, even now. The hope I have lived in this week shakes me still, like a great machine, and it will not stop although it is driving nothing.

Wolfram said thoughtfully, neutrally: "No. Asgrim won't come here. He has bigger things to see to. We've no troops to speak of and we can't harm him, thou sees."

I said, and I do not know how I managed to enunciate it: "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," he said. "Why should he come? He has the rest of the land to settle first. After that, he may deal out justice to such as remain in Mark. We shall have to wait for that."

How could I have not jumped up and screamed at him for his patience? All I did was sit there like a stuffed thing, saying: "Is there really nothing to be done?"

"Nothing," says Wolfram. "We've lost, Emily. Thou knows that."

We neither of us said anything for a while. I have been thinking about that strange, quiet space. Wolfram stood by the hearth and I sat in the chair, and we were both quite aware of the true state of affairs. It was in Wolfram's most characteristic manner. He knew how I felt and I knew how he felt, and neither of us had struggled for the knowledge. Wolfram had just let me know it was there, because it was there, and I know it never occurred to him to dissemble. Wolfram never dissembles—this is the odd thing about him. He has called me *thou* and now by my true name, because he feels genuinely friendly towards me. I see now that he did not set Hrinkle on me too, not to injure me with Asgrim, but because it never occurred to him to harm me. I am his friend. And of course he is quite right. I may struggle fretfully to deny it, but I feel just the same towards Wolfram. I could have harmed him over Kjarten, but I never dreamt of doing so. He is my friend. What a weird and comfortless thing to know. But it is plain truth, like the other.

We have both lost. He's right. But he did not get it really home to me until he was, rather aimlessly, leaving the room. Then he stopped, with the door half open, and said: "Does thou want to come down? There's no need for thee to be locked up now, thou knows."

I couldn't go. I couldn't face it just then. It was too much. I thanked him and asked if I might come out later.

"When thou likes," he said, and went off, leaving the door ajar. I have been sitting in the draught from it all this time, trying to muster courage to go through it.

•

I did it. I have been out and around the castle these last two days. It is the strangest feeling to be this much free, and quite exhausting. I have had to retreat back here from time to time, as if it were home, away from the overwhelming size and barrenness of the place. There is scarcely anyone here. The few of us who are left tend to gather in the kitchens, where there is a fire, a certain amount of food, and an ill-tempered cook. I eat there now and watch Edwin picking sickeningly at his teeth, Albert guzzling, and Wolfram drearily munching. Supplies are short, even for our small number. I suppose we shall starve in the end.

The rest of the castle is nothing but acres of stone floors, passages, stairs and rooms. People have left belongings here and there as they fled. I came across a purse full of gold coins in the soldiers' quarters yesterday, but nobody wants it. As Edwin said, what good is it to us? They are Hrinkle's currency, and even if the townspeople would deal with us, it is not legal tender any more. Currency is being made in all the other provinces now, and you have to use that. Albert says they would rather have a Northern penny or a Hathriver farthing than this whole purse of Mark gold.

Wolfram says there are rumours that Regan has been defeated somewhere in the north-west.

•

Yes, the rumours are confirmed today. Asgrim is moving south again. The vibrations of my unquelled hope have driven me to a desperate exploration. I have been to visit his prison. I wish I had not gone. The truth hurts so.

Asgrim had a prison entirely appropriate to him. He knew what was fitting, what was due to himself. I found a suite of rooms, three or four times the size of mine, grandiose with vaulted ceilings and great arched fireplaces. They have put back most of the furniture and roughly reassembled it, so that the rooms give an empty impression of what they were like when he was there. They are rich and comfortable. Except for the bars on the windows, you would think you were in a section of some Stately Home. I wandered about, feeling Asgrim's personality forcibly—more forcibly, I think, than ever before. I could see him writing at the big table, glancing at the guards, and seizing his chance to slip his charred paper into its framework. I could see him sitting on the couch, standing by the fireplace, washing in the ornate bowl outside his bedroom. I could see Kjarten screwing up drawings and tossing them into that wide, cold grate, and Asgrim, I think, rescuing them unobtrusively with the heel of his shoe, keeping up a heavy, decorous calmness while he did it.

"Decorous" is a word that comes in well here. I think it was the *decorum* of those rooms which oppressed me most. There was nothing

that was not somehow fitting for the home of a great man, from the patterned carpets to the sombre embroidered covers of his large square bed. It is all right, proper, noble, and nothing to do with me. The guards had camp-beds in his bedroom and just outside it. The one in the bedroom was very near Asgrim's bed. It must have been an easy matter to lean out and smash the iron bar down on Swart-one's head. I could see the space where he took the bar out of the window too. Economically done. Cool, courageous and lucky. The guards outside swore they heard nothing until it was too late.

Yes, for all these rooms had seen miseries and horrors, what they show you is austere grandeur. There is little joy and no kindness in them. You feel the pressure of Asgrim's overriding purpose there. He meant to free first his son and then himself, and then to take his revenge. He did so. And nothing would possess him to come back. You feel that too. There was no sign that he was happy—indeed, it is certain he never could have been, not more than momentarily—and no sign that he was ever doubtful. I begin to see that the impression he gave of inviolate strength was due to the very certainty of his intentions. Oh, these rooms are cold and grand and hard in a way that makes me shudder. And if this is what he is like, whatever possessed him to trifle with me?

The door to the courtyard was unlocked. I went out there for a minute. It is much bigger than I realised. Asgrim had to walk in a very small portion of it if he was to see me. I looked over to my place. It seems somewhat above his, inadequate and insecure. My door is low and lopsided, what I can see of it, and anyone walking in my court must look as if they are treading the edge of a precipice. It is very cheerless. No wonder he pitied me—for I think he did. You can see the apple-tree much more clearly from his court. It is all bursting pale green buds, with the blossom getting pink between just now. But I am a fool to believe Edwin. It can't be a pippin: you have to graft them. It is nothing more than a meagre little crab-apple, seeded by some bird.

This week is hell. Hell. Edwin goes in hourly expectation of hearing Asgrim is crowned king. Even Wolfram admits it is likely.

•

No news of a coronation yet, but a council has been set up of those lordships who survived the fighting, or their heirs, and the aldormen of every town except Mark. Aldorman is like Mayor. The marks are all being restored and reinstated, under further lords and councils. Wolfram shakes his head and says glumly that Asgrim is trying to put the clock back and that it won't do. He says that after all the upheaval you can't put things back to what they were two generations ago, especially now all the thralls are freed. I don't know. It looks to me as if Asgrim is trying to do

what I suggested in my last note. But I can't believe it. I can't, not with Mark itself abandoned like this, almost as if town and citadel were left to die. We are almost the only people in the area now. Edwin gets news by going out on the main road and accosting travellers.

And I still hope. This is such stupidity. I cannot believe that a man with Asgrim's regard for integrity would do this to me, even though I know he has done it. I have been severe with myself. I have gone through my writing, and I have seen I never wrote him anything that was not cautious and a little cold. He must think I never cared. Perhaps he thinks I betrayed him to Wolfram. But I believe it does not matter to him what I think, for the more I consider it, the clearer it is to me that I was just an object, out beyond his prison, on which he hung some of the feelings he had no other outlet for. Is this always the way things are? Do we never know anyone better than this? The gods alone know.

But I think it was not quite like that. I suspect that my ignorance of the country and its language has led me to be taken in by a nice play—a sort of courtly love. I am sure of it. Asgrim never once called me *thou*. It was all ceremonious and respectful and distant. And the verses he wrote made it clear, from the start, that what he wanted to feel was a something-else, metaphysical, large and abstract, that only ever, at the most, included me along with the rest of his world. The last one he sent says as much:

> "... the fire that fetches thunder,
> Kindled of itself ..."

Which is as much as to say: "I have induced in myself all the feelings I had about you, although you may be a nice girl, and you have certainly taught me one or two things I shall go away and use to advantage." Or is that too cynical?

I think he never meant to be dishonest. I'm sure he imagined I knew the conventions. But all this talk of Truth. Even in this land it means more than one thing—reality, fidelity, integrity, knowledge of your ideal—but then they only have the one word for all these things. Did Asgrim know, for a moment, that he was playing with this word? I think I knew, but I hid it from myself. I thought he meant fidelity, but now I see it was the only thing he didn't mean. He used Truth for all the others, impartially. And I understood him to that extent, but wouldn't see it.

Yet I believe he cared. I *know* he cared. He took risks enough to make that obvious. Even though we could never get near one another, he felt something. He may have decided it was impossible and unreal—as I

see now it was—but then what is possible, what is real, what is true? This was a terrible waste of feeling.

•

They tell me Asgrim married Hilda yesterday. Did he need to do that? Edwin says he wishes him joy of it—Hilda is supposed to be in love with her brother. I think, from what I saw, that may be true. A bad end to a wretched business. I have no heart to write any more today.

The New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA) and NESFA Press

Recent books from NESFA Press:

- *Everard's Ride* by Diana Wynne Jones $19.95
- *Ingathering: The Complete People Stories of Zenna Henderson* $21.95
- *Norstrilia* by Cordwainer Smith $20.95
- *The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith* $24.95
- *A Bookman's Fantasy* by Fred Lerner (trade paperback) $11.95
- *The Passage of the Light: The Recursive SF of Barry N. Malzberg* (trade paperback) $14.00
- *Double Feature* by Emma Bull and Will Shetterly $17.95
- *Making Book* by Teresa Nielsen Hayden (trade paperback) $9.95
- *Vietnam and Other Alien Worlds* by Joe Haldeman $17.00
- *The Best of James H. Schmitz* $18.95

Books may be ordered by writing to:

NESFA Press
PO Box 809
Framingham, MA 01701-0203

We accept checks, Visa, and MasterCard. Please add $2 postage and handling per order.

The New England Science Fiction Association:

NESFA is an all-volunteer, non-profit organization of science fiction and fantasy fans. Besides publishing, our activities include running Boskone (New England's oldest SF convention) in February each year, producing a semi-monthly newsletter, holding discussion groups relating to the field, and hosting a variety of social events. If you are interested in learning more about us, we'd like to hear from you. Write to our address above!

Acknowledgments

As with all NESFA Press publications, *Everard's Ride* is the product of many people's volunteer efforts: It was edited by Aron K. Insinga and Mark L. Olson. Claire Anderson once again employed her extensive understanding of the field and her excellent taste to help select the stories. We thank George Flynn, Master Proofreader, without whom the textual and typographic quality of this book would have been diminished. The dustjacket was designed by Merle and Aron Insinga. Merle Insinga and Tony Lewis scanned or typed much of the material, and Merle also entered many proofer's corrections. Preliminary proofreading of the text, a necessary but tedious task, was done by Merle Insinga, Ann Broomhead, Gay Ellen Dennett, Mark Hertel, Paula Lieberman, Sharon Sbarsky, Sarah Prince, and Rick Katze. We thank you all!

Everard's Ride was printed by Bookcrafters of Fredericksburg, VA. It is printed on acid-free 60# Booktext natural. The text is set in Adobe Garamond, and the display font is Post Antiqua Regular.

— Aron Insinga and Mark Olson
December 1994

Diana Wynne Jones

Diana Wynne Jones is perhaps the UK's best-known writer of children's fantasy. This collection demonstrates that she is also an accomplished writer of adult material. She began her literary career with three plays and then published her first novel (not SF) in 1970. Since 1973, she has written over twenty novels ranging from fantasy to sf, for children and for adults, and from humorous to dark.

Ruth Sanderson

Ruth Sanderson is a noted Fantasy and Children's book illustrator with over forty books to her credit. Her most recent book is the lavishly illustrated *The Tempest* with Bruce Colvill.

Everard's Ride

Contents:

- Introduction by Patricia Wrede
- "Everard's Ride"
- "No One"
- "A Plague of Peacocks"
- "The Shape of Narrative in *The Lord of the Rings*"
- "The Master"
- "nad and Dan adn Quaffy"
- "Dragon Reserve, Home Eight"
- "The True State of Affairs"

Edited by Aron K. Insinga and Mark L. Olson

51995

9 780915 368631

ISBN 0-915368-63-3